Mr. MARX'S SECRET

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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MR. MARX'S SECRET.

"I crossed the room to where Milly was sitting."
(Chapter XXX.)

MR. MARX'S SECRET

By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "Anna the Adventuress," "A Maker of History," etc.

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This story, written by the Author some years ago, is now issued in volume form for the first time.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	News from the Pacific	11
II.	Mr. Francis	15
III.	The Murder at the Slate-Pits	18
IV.	My Mother's Warning	23
V.	Ravenor of Ravenor	27
VI.	A Doubtful Visitor	39
VII.	A Meeting and a Metamorphosis	43
VIII.	An Abode of Mystery	49
IX.	Mr. Marx	58
X.	Lady Silchester	65
XI.	The Cry in the Avenue	70
XII.	A Dark Corner in the Avenue	76
XIII.	The Cloud Between Us	81
XIV.	A Meeting in the Coffee-Room	85
XV.	A Tête-à-tête Dinner	89
XVI.	Miss Mabel Fay	93
XVII.	Behind the Scenes at the Torchester Theatre	98
XVIII.	At Midnight on the Moor	103
XIX.	A Strange Attack	111
XX.	The Monastery Among the Hills	115
XXI.	A Message from the Dead	124
XXII.	For Life	127
XXIII.	My Guardian	135
XXIV.	My First Dinner Party	138
XXV.	Mr. Marx's Warning	144
XXVI.	A Lost Photograph	148
XXVII.	Leonard de Cartienne	157
XXVIII.	"As Rome Does"	164

CHAPTER.	PAGE
XXIX.—A Dinner Party Sub-rosa	169
XXX.—Écarté with Mr. Fothergill	174
XXXI.—A Startling Discovery	182
XXXII.—Forestalled	190
XXXIII.—A Gleam of Light	195
XXXIV.—Dr. Schofield's Opinion	199
XXXV.—An Invitation	204
XXXVI.—A Metamorphosis	209
XXXVII.—Mr. Marx is Wanted	218
XXXVIII.—I Accept a Mission	223
XXXIX.—My Ride	225
XL.—My Mission	229
XLI.—The Count de Cartienne	232
XLII.—News of Mr. Marx	240
XLIII.—About Town	246
XLIV.—A Midnight Excursion to the Suburbs	252
XLV.—A Mysterious Commission	258
XLVI.—A Brush with the Police	261
XLVII.—Light at Last	264
XLVIII.—A Page of History	269
XLIX.—I will Go Alone	278
L.—I Meet my Father	280
LI.—Dawn	284
LII.—Where is Mr. Marx?	287
LIII.—Messrs. Higginson and Co.	293
LIV.—A Raid	299
LV.—The Mystery of Mr. Marx	304
LVI.—The End of It	308

MR. MARX'S SECRET

CHAPTER I.

NEWS FROM THE PACIFIC.

My HOME was a quaint, three-storeyed, ivy-clad farmhouse in a Midland county. It lay in a hollow, nestled close up against Rothland Wood, the dark, close-growing trees of which formed a picturesque background to the worn greystone whereof it was fashioned.

In front, just across the road, was the boundary-wall of Ravenor Park, with its black fir spinneys, huge masses of lichen-covered rock, clear fish-ponds, and breezy hills, from the summits of which were visible the sombre grey towers of Ravenor Castle, standing out with grim, rugged boldness against the sky.

Forbidden ground though it was, there was not a yard of the park up to the inner boundary fence which I did not know; not a spinney where I had not searched for birds' nests or raided in quest of the first primrose; not a hill on which I had not spent some part of a summer afternoon.

I was a trespasser, of course; but I was the son of Farmer Morton, an old tenant on the estate, and much in favour with the keepers, by reason of a famous brew which he was ever ready to offer a thirsty man, or to drink himself. So "Morton's young 'un" was unmolested; and, save for an

occasional good-humoured warning from Crooks, the head-gamekeeper, during breeding-time, I had the run of the place.

Moreover, the great estates of which Ravenor Park was the centre knew at that time no other master than a lawyer of non-sporting proclivities, so the preserves were only looked after as a matter of form.

I was eight years old, and an unusually hot summer was at its height. It was past midday, and I had just come out from the house, with the intention of settling down for an afternoon's reading in a shady corner of the orchard. I had reached the stack-yard gate when I stopped short, my hand upon the fastening.

A most unusual sound was floating across the meadows, through the breathless air. The church-bells of Rothland, the village on the other side of the wood, had suddenly burst out into a wild, clashing peal of joy.

In a country district everybody knows everyone else's business; and, child though I was, I knew that no marriage was taking place anywhere near.

I stood listening in wonderment, for I had never heard such a thing before; and, while I was lingering, the bells from Annerley, a village a little farther away, and the grand, mellow-sounding chimes from the chapel at Ravenor Castle, breaking the silence of many years, took up the peal, and the lazy summer day seemed all of a sudden to wake up into a state of unaccountable delight.

I ran back towards the house and met my mother standing in the cool stone porch. The men about the farm were all grouped together, wondering. No one had the least idea of what had happened.

And then Jim Harrison, the waggoner, who had just come in from the home meadow, called out quickly, pointing with his finger; and far away,

along the white, dusty road, we could see the figure of a man on horseback riding towards us at a furious gallop.

"It be the master!" he cried, excitedly. "It be the master, for sure! There bean't no mistaking Brown Bess's gallop. Lord-a-mercy! how 'e be a-riding her!"

We all trooped out on to the road to meet my father, eager to hear the news. In a few moments he reached us, and brought Brown Bess to a standstill, bathed in sweat and dust, and quivering in every limb.

"Hurrah, lads!" he shouted, waving his whip above his head. "Hurrah! There never was such a bit o' news as I've got for you! All Mellborough be gone crazy about it!"

"What is it, George? Why don't you tell us?" my mother asked quickly. And, to my surprise, her hand, in which mine was resting, was as cold as ice, notwithstanding the August heat.

He raised himself in his stirrups and shouted so that all might hear:

"Squire Ravenor be come to life again! They 'a' found him on an island in the Pacific, close against the coral reef where his yacht went down six years ago! He's on his way home again, lads. Think of that! Sal, lass, bring us up a gallon of ale and another after it. We'll drink to his homecoming, lads!"

There was a burst of applause and many exclamations of wonder. My mother's hand had moved, as though unconsciously, to my shoulder, and she was leaning heavily upon me.

"Where did you hear this, George?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

"Why, it be in all the London papers this morning," he answered, taking off his hat and wiping his forehead. "The steamer that's bringing him

home 'a' sent a message from some foreign port, and Lawyer Cox he's got one, and it's all written up large on the walls of the Corn Exchange. I reckon it'll make those deuced lawyers sit up!" chuckled my father, as he slowly dismounted.

"Lord-a-mercy! Only to think on it! Six year on a little bit o' an island, and not a living soul to speak a word to! And now he's on his way home again. It beats all story-telling I ever heerd on. Why, Alice, lass, it 'a' quite upset you," he added, looking anxiously at my mother. "You're all white and scared-like. Dost feel badly?"

She was standing with her back to us and when she turned round it seemed to me that a change had crept into her face.

"It is the heat and excitement," she said quietly. "This is strange news. I think that I will go in and rest."

"All right, lass! Get thee indoors and lie down for a bit. Now, then, lads. Hurrah for the squire and long life to him! Pour it out, Jim—pour it out! Don't be afraid on it. Such news as this don't coom every day."

And, with the vision of my stalwart yeoman father, the centre of a little group of farm-labourers, holding his foaming glass high above his head, and his honest face ruddy with heat and excitement, my memories of this scene grow dim and fade away.

CHAPTER II.

MR. FRANCIS.

I WAS alone with my father in the kitchen, and he was looking as I had never seen him look before. It was late in the afternoon—as near as I can remember, about six weeks after the news had reached us of Mr. Ravenor's wonderful adventures. He had just come in for tea, flushed with toil and labouring in the hot sun. But as he stood on the flags before me, reading a letter which had been sent up from the village, the glow seemed to die out from his face and his strong, rough hands trembled.

"It's a lie!" I heard him mutter to himself, in a hoarse whisper—"a wicked lie!"

Then he sank back in one of the high-backed chairs and I watched him, frightened.

"Philip, lad," he said to me, speaking slowly, and yet with a certain eagerness in his tone, "has your mother had any visitors lately whilst I 'a' been out on the farm?"

I shook my head.

"No one, except Mr. Francis," I added doubtfully.

He groaned and hid his face for a moment.

"How often has he been here?" he asked, after a while. "When did he come first? Dost remember?"

"Yes," I answered promptly, "It was on the day Tom Foulds fell from the oat-stack and broke his leg. There was another gentleman with him then. I saw them looking in at the orchard gate, so I asked them if they wanted anything, and the strange gentleman said that he was thirsty and would like some milk, so I took him into the dairy; and I think that mother must have known him before, for she seemed so surprised to see him.

"He gave me half a crown, too," I went on, "to run away and watch for a friend of his. But the friend never came, although I waited ever so long. He's been often since; but I don't like him and——"

I broke off in sudden dismay. Had not my mother forbidden my mentioning these visits to anyone? What had I done? I began to cry silently.

My father rose from his chair and leaned against the oaken chimney-piece, with his back turned towards me.

"It's he, sure enough!" he gasped. "Heaven forgive her! But him—him——"

His voice seemed choked with passion and he did not finish his sentence. I knew that I had done wrong, and a vague apprehension of threatening evil stole swiftly upon me. But I sat still and waited.

It was long before my father turned round and spoke again. When he did so I scarcely knew him, for there were deep lines across his forehead, and all the healthy, sunburnt tan seemed to have gone from his face. He looked ten years older and I trembled when he spoke.

"Listen, Philip, lad!" he said gravely. "Your mother thinks I be gone straight away to Farmer Woods to see about the colt, don't she?"

I nodded silently. We had not expected him home again until late in the evening.

"Now, look you here, Philip," he continued. "She's gone to bed wi' a headache, you say? Very well. Just you promise me that you won't go near her."

I promised readily enough. Then he bade me get my tea and he sank back again into his chair. Once I asked him timidly if he were not going to have some, but he took no notice. When I had finished he led me softly upstairs and locked me in my room. Never to this day have I forgotten that dull look of hopeless agony in his face as he turned away and left me.

CHAPTER III.

THE MURDER AT THE SLATE-PITS.

It was late on this same evening. All day long the thunder had been rumbling and growling, and now the storm seemed close at hand.

I had partly undressed, but it was too hot to get into bed, so I leaned out of my wide-open window, watching the black clouds hanging down from the sky, and listening to the rustling of leaves in the wood—sure sign of the coming storm.

The air was stifling; and, longing feverishly for the rain, I sat in the deep window-sill and looked out into the scented darkness, for honeysuckle and clematis drooped around my window and the garden below was overgrown with homely, sweet-smelling flowers.

Suddenly I started. I was quick at hearing, and I had distinctly caught the sound of a light, firm step passing down the garden path beneath. My first impulse was to call out, but I checked it when I recognised the tall, graceful figure moving swiftly along the gravel walk in the shade of the yew-hedge. It was my mother!

I watched her, scarcely believing my eyes. What could she be wanting in the garden at this hour? And while I sat on the window casement, wondering, a cold shiver of alarm chilled me, for

I saw a man creep stealthily out from the wood and hurry across the little stretch of meadow towards the garden gate, where she was standing.

The moon was shining with a sickly light through a thick halo of mist and I could only just distinguish the figures of my mother and this man, side by side, talking earnestly. I watched them with riveted eyes until I heard a quick step on the floor behind me and a hand was laid upon my mouth, stifling my cry of surprise.

"It's only me, Philip, lad," whispered a hoarse, tremulous voice. "I didn't want you to call out —that's all. Hast seen anything of this before?" And he pointed, with shaking finger, towards the window, from which he had drawn me back a little.

I looked at him, a great horror stealing over me. His ruddy face was blanched and drawn, as though with pain; and there was a terrible light in his eyes. I was frightened and half inclined to cry.

"No," I faltered. "It's only Mr. Francis, isn't it?"

"Only Mr. Francis!" I heard my father repeat, with a groan. "Oh, Alice, lass—Alice! How could you?"

He staggered blindly towards the door. I rushed after him, piteously calling him back, but he pushed me off roughly and hurried out.

I heard him leave the house, but he did not go down the garden. Then, in a few minutes, every one of which seemed to me like an hour, the low voices at the gate ceased and my mother came slowly up the path towards the house.

I rushed downstairs and met her in the hall. She seemed half surprised, half angry, to see me.

"Philip," she exclaimed, "I thought you were in bed long ago! What are you doing here?"

"I am frightened!" I sobbed out. "Father has been in my room watching you at the gate and he talked so strangely. He is very angry and he looks as though he were going to hurt someone."

My mother leaned against the wall, every vestige of colour gone from her face, and her hand pressed to her side. She understood better than I did then.

"Where is he now?" she asked hysterically. "Quick, Philip—quick! Tell me!"

"He is gone," I answered. "He went out by the front door and up the road."

A sudden calmness seemed to come to her and she stood for a moment thinking aloud.

"He has gone up to the wood gate! They will meet in the wood. Oh, Heaven, prevent it!" she cried passionately.

She turned and rushed into the garden, down the path and through the wicket gate towards the wood. I followed her, afraid to stay alone. A vast mass of inky-black clouds had sailed in front of the moon and the darkness, especially in the wood, was intense.

More than once I fell headlong down, scratching my face and hands with the brambles; but each time I was on my feet immediately, scarcely conscious of the pain in my wild desire to keep near my mother.

How she found her way I cannot tell. Great pieces of her dress were torn off and remained hanging to the bushes into which she stepped; and many times I saw her run against a tree and recoil half stunned by the shock.

But still we made progress, and at last we came to a part of the wood where the trees and undergrowth were less dense and there was a steep ascent. Up it we ran and when we reached the top my mother paused to listen, while I stood, breathless, by her side.

Save that the leaves above us were stirring with a curious motion, there was not a sound in the whole wood. Birds and animals, even insects, seemed to have crept away to their holes before the coming storm. We could see nothing, for a thick mantle of darkness—a darkness which could almost be felt—had fallen upon the earth. We stood crouched together, trembling and fearful.

"Thank Heaven for the darkness!" my mother murmured to herself. "Philip," she went on, stooping down and feeling for my hand, "do you know where we are? We should be close to the slate-pits."

I was on the point of answering her, but the words died away on my parted lips. Such a sight as was revealed to us at that moment might have driven a strong man mad.

Although half a lifetime has passed away, I can see it now as at that moment. But describe it I cannot, for no words of mine could paint the thrilling beauty and, at the same time, the breathless horror of the scene which opened like a flash before us.

Trees, sky, and space were suddenly bathed in a brilliant, lurid light, the like of which I have never since seen, nor ever shall again. It came and went in a space of time which only thought could measure; and this is what it showed us:—

Yawning at our feet the deep pit and sullen waters of the quarry, for we were scarcely a single step from the precipitous edge; the huge piles of slate and the sheds with the workmen's tools scattered around; and my father, his arms thrown upwards in agony, and a wild cry bursting from his lips, at the very moment that he was hurled over the opposite side of the chasm!

We saw the frantic convulsions of despair upon his ashen face, his eyes starting from their sockets.

as he felt himself falling into space; and we saw the dim outline of another man staggering back from the brink, with his hands outstretched before his face, in horror at what he had done.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the fierce glare vanished. The heavens—only a moment before open and flooding the land with sheets of living fire—were black and impenetrable, and the crashing thunder shook the air around and made the earth tremble, as though it were splitting up and the very elements were being dissolved.

With a cry, the heartrending anguish of which will ring for ever in my ears, my mother sank down, a white, scared heap; and I, my limbs unstrung and my senses numbed, crouched helpless beside her. Then the rain fell and there was silence.

CHAPTER IV.

MY MOTHER'S WARNING.

For many weeks after that terrible night in Rothland Wood, I lay wrestling with a fierce fever, my recovery from which was deemed little short of miraculous. A sound constitution, however, and careful nursing brought me round, and I opened my eyes one sunny morning upon what seemed to me almost a new world.

The first thing that I can clearly remember after my return to consciousness was the extraordinary change which had taken place in my mother. From a beautiful, active woman, she seemed to have become transformed into a stern, cold statue.

Even now I can recall how frightened I was of her during those first days of convalescence, and how I shrank from her constant presence by my bedside with a nameless dread.

The change was in her appearance as well as in her manner. Her rich brown hair had turned completely grey, and there was a frigid, set look in her face, denuded of all expression or affection, which chilled me every time I looked into it. It was the face—not of my mother, but of a stranger.

As I began to regain strength and the doctors pronounced me fit to leave the sick-room, she

began to display signs of uneasiness, and often looked at me in a singular kind of way, as though there were something which she would say to me.

And one night I woke up suddenly, to find her standing by my bedside, wrapped in a long dressing-gown, her grey hair streaming down her back and a wild gleam in her burning eyes. I started up in bed with a cry of fear, but she held out her hand with a gesture which she intended to be reassuring.

"Nothing is the matter, Philip," she said. "Lie down, but listen."

I obeyed, and had she noticed me closely she would have seen that I was shivering; for her strange appearance and the total lack of affection in her manner, had filled me with something approaching to horror.

"Philip, you will soon be well enough to go out," she continued. "People will ask you questions about that night."

It was the first time the subject had been broached between us. I raised myself a little in the bed and gazed at her, with blanched cheeks and fascinated eyes.

"Listen, Philip! You must remember nothing. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I answered faintly.

"You must forget that you saw me in the garden; you must forget everything your father said to you. Do you hear?"

"Yes," I repeated. "But—but, mother——"

"Well?"

"Will he be caught—the man who killed father?" I asked timidly. "Oh, I hope he will!"

Her lips parted slowly, and she laughed—a bitter, hysterical laugh, which seemed to me the most awful sound I had ever heard.

"Hope! Yes; you may hope—hope if you will!" she cried; "but remember this, boy: If your hope comes true, it will be an evil day for you and for me! Remember!"

Then she turned and walked to the door without another word. I sat in bed and watched her piteously, with a great lump in my throat and a sore heart. The moonlight was pouring in through my latticed window, falling full upon the long, graceful lines of her stately figure and her hard, cold face. I was forlorn and unhappy, but to look at her froze the words upon my lips.

Merciless and cruel her features seemed to me. There was no pity, no love, not a shadow of response to my half-formed, appealing gesture. I let her go and sank back upon my pillows, weeping bitterly, with a deep sense of utter loneliness and desolation.

On the following day I was allowed to leave my room and very soon I was able to get about. As my mother had anticipated, many people asked me questions concerning the events of that hideous night. To one and all my answer was the same. I remembered nothing. My illness had left my memory a blank.

Long afterwards I saw more clearly how well it was that I had obeyed my mother's bidding.

A brief extract from a county newspaper will be sufficient to show what the universal opinion was concerning my father's murder. I copy it here:

"In another column will be found an account of the inquest on the body of George Morton, farmer, late of Rothland Wood Farm. The verdict returned by the jury—namely, 'Wilful murder against John Francis'—was, in the face of the evidence, the only possible one; and everyone must unite in hoping that the efforts of the police

will be successful, and that the criminal will not be allowed to escape. The facts are simple and conclusive.

"It appears from the evidence of Mr. Bullson, landlord of the George Hotel, Mellborough, and of several other *habitués* of the place, that only a few days before the deed was committed, there was a violent dispute between deceased and Francis and that threats were freely used on both sides. On the night in question Francis started from Rothland village shortly after nine o'clock, with the intention of making his way through the wood to Ravenor Castle. Owing, no doubt, to the extraordinary darkness of the night, he appears to have lost his way, and to have been directed by Mrs. Morton, who noticed him wandering about near her garden gate.

"Mrs. Morton declines to swear to his identity, owing to the darkness; but this, in the face of other circumstances, must count for little in his favour. He was also seen by the deceased, who, enraged at finding him on his land and addressing his wife, started in pursuit, followed by Mrs. Morton and her little boy, who arrived at the slate-pits in time to witness, but too late to prevent, the awful tragedy which we fully reported a few days since.

"In face of the flight of the man Francis, and the known fact that he was in the wood that night, there is little room for doubt as to his being the actual perpetrator of the deed, although the details of the struggle must remain, for the present, shrouded in mystery. Mr. Ravenor, who has just arrived in England, has offered a reward of £500 for information leading to the arrest of Francis, who was a servant at the Castle."

CHAPTER V.

RAVENOR OF RAVENOR.

It was generally expected that my mother would be anxious to depart as soon as possible from a neighbourhood which had such terrible associations for her. As a matter of fact, she showed no intention of doing anything of the sort. At the time I rather wondered at this, but I am able now to divine her reason.

It chanced that the farm, of which my father had been tenant for nearly a quarter of a century, was taken by a neighbour who had no use for the house, and so it was arranged that we should stay on at a merely nominal rent. Then began a chapter of my life without event, which I can pass rapidly over.

Every morning I walked over to Rothland and received two hours' instruction from the curate, and in the afternoon my mother taught me modern languages. The rest of the day I spent alone, wandering whithersoever I pleased, staying away as long as I chose, and returning when I felt inclined. The results of such a life at my age soon developed themselves. I became something of a misanthrope, a great reader, and a passionate lover of Nature. At any rate, it was healthy, and my taste for all sorts of outdoor sport prevented my becoming a bookworm.

It had its influence, too, upon my disposition. It strengthened and gave colour to my imagination, expanded my mind, and filled me with a strong love for everything that was vigorous and fresh and pure in the books I read.

Shakespeare and Goethe were my first favourites in literature; but as I grew older the fascination of lyric poetry obtained a hold upon me, and Shelley and Keats, for a time, reigned supreme in my fancy. But my tastes were catholic. I read everything that came in my way, and was blessed with a wonderful memory, which enabled me to retain much that was worth retaining,

Meanwhile, the more purely technical part of my education was being steadily persevered in; and so I was not surprised, although it was rather a blow to me, when the clergyman who had been my tutor walked home with me through the wood one summer evening, and told my mother that it was useless my going to him any longer, for I already knew all that he could teach me.

I watched her covertly, hoping that she would show some sign of gratification at what I felt to be a high compliment. But she simply remarked that, if such was the case, she supposed the present arrangement had better terminate, thanked him for the trouble he had taken with me, and dismissed the matter. I scanned her cold, beautiful face in vain for any signs of interest. The cloud which had fallen between us on the night of my father's murder had never been lifted.

The curate stayed to tea with us, and afterwards I walked back through the woods with him, for he was a sociable fellow, fond of company —even mine.

When I reached home again I found my mother looking out for me, and I knew from her manner that she had something important to say to me.

"Philip, I have heard to-day that Mr. Ravenor is expected home," she said slowly.

I started and a little exclamation of pleasure escaped me. There was no man whom I longed so much to see. What a reputation was his! A scholar of European fame, a poet, and a great sinner; a Crœsus; at times a reckless Sybarite, at others an ascetic and a hermit; a student of Voltaire; the founder of a new school of philosophy. All these things I had heard of him at different times, but as yet I had never seen him. Something more than my curiosity had been excited and I looked forward now to its gratification.

My mother took no note of my exclamation, but her brow darkened. We were standing together on the lawn in front of the house and she was in the shadow of a tall cypress tree.

"I do not suppose that he will remain here long," she continued, in a hard, strained tone; "but while he is at the Castle it is my wish that you do not enter the park at all."

"Not enter the park!" I repeated the words and stared at my mother in blank astonishment. What difference could Mr. Ravenor's presence make to us?

"Surely you do not mean this?" I cried, bitterly disappointed. "Why, I have been looking forward for years to see Mr. Ravenor! He is a famous man!"

"I know it," she interrupted, "and a very dangerous one. I do not wish you to meet him. The chances are that he would not notice you if he saw you, but it is better to run no risks. You will remember what I have said? A man of his strange views and principles is to be avoided—especially by an impressionable boy like you."

She left me dumbfounded, crossed the lawn with smooth, even footsteps, and entered the house.

I watched her disappear, disturbed and uneasy. Something in her manner had conveyed a strange impression to me. I could not help thinking that she had other reasons than those she had given for wishing to keep Mr. Ravenor and me apart. It seemed on the face of it to be a very absurd notion, but it had laid hold of me and her subsequent conduct did not tend to dispel it.

On the afternoon of his expected arrival I lingered about for hours in the orchard, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, for the gates of the park, opposite our house, were the nearest to Mellborough Station. But I was disappointed. He came, it is true, but in a closed brougham, drawn by a pair of swift, high-stepping bays, which swept like a flash by the hedge over which I was looking, leaving a confused recollection of glistening harness, handsome liveries, and a dark, noble face, partly turned towards me, but imperfectly seen. It was a glimpse which only increased my interest; yet how to gratify my curiosity in view of my mother's wishes I could not tell.

That night she renewed her prohibition. She came to me in the little room, where I kept my books and Penates, and laid her hand upon my shoulder. Mr. Ravenor had returned, she said—how did she know, save that she, too, had been watching, for the flag was not yet hoisted?—and she hoped that I would remember what her wishes were.

I promised that I would observe them, as far as I could, although they seemed to me ridiculous, and I did not hesitate to hint as much. What was more unlikely than that Mr. Ravenor, distinguished man of the world, should take the slightest notice of a country boy, much more attempt to gain any sort of influence over him? The more I thought of it and of my mother's

nervous fears, the more I grew convinced, against my will, of some other motive which was to be kept secret from me.

A week passed and very little was seen of Mr. Ravenor by anyone. As usual, many rumours were circulated and discussed. He was reported to have shut himself up in his library and to have refused admission to all visitors. He was living like an anchorite, fasting and working hard, surrounded by books and manuscripts all day and night, and far into the small hours of the morning. He was doing penance for recent excesses; he was preparing for some wild orgies; he was writing a novel, a philosophical pamphlet, an article for the reviews, or another volume of poems.

Among all classes of our neighbours nothing else was talked about but the doings, or supposed doings, of Mr. Ravenor.

One afternoon chance led me into the little room which my mother called her own, a room I seldom entered. There was a small volume lying on the table and carelessly I took it up and glanced at the title. Then, with a quick exclamation of pleasure, I carried it away with me. It was Mr. Ravenor's first little volume of poems, which I had tried in vain to get. The Mellborough bookseller of whom I had ordered it told me that it was out of print. The first edition had been exhausted long since and the author had refused to allow a second edition to be issued.

I met my mother in the hall and held out the volume to her.

"You never told me that you had a copy of Mr. Ravenor's poems," I said reproachfully. "I have just found it in your room."

She started, and for a moment I feared that she was going to insist upon my giving up the

book. She did not do so, however; but I noticed that the hand which was resting upon the banisters was grasping the handrail nervously, as though for support, and that she was white to the very lips.

"No; I had forgotten," she said slowly—"I mean that I had forgotten you had ever asked for it. Take care of it, Philip, and give it me back to-night. It was given to me by a friend and I value it."

I promised and left the house. My range of pleasures was in some respects a limited one, but it did not prevent me from being an epicure with regard to their enjoyment. I did not glance inside the book, although I was longing to do so, until I had walked five or six miles and had reached one of my favourite halting-places. Then I threw myself down in the shadow of a great rock on the top of Beacon Hill and took the volume from my pocket.

It was a small, olive-green book, delicately bound, and printed upon rough paper. It had been given to my mother, evidently, for her Christian name was inside, written in a fine, dashing hand, and underneath were some initials which had become indistinct. Then, having satisfied myself of this, and handled it for a few moments, I turned over the pages rapidly and began to read.

The first part was composed almost entirely of sonnets and love-poems. One after another I read them and wondered. There was nothing amateurish, nothing weak, here. They were full of glowing imagery, of brilliant colouring, of passion, of fire. Crude some of them seemed to me, who had read no modern poetry and knew many of Shakespeare's and Milton's sonnets by heart; but full of genius, nevertheless, and with the breath of life warm in them.

The second portion was devoted to longer poems

and these I liked best. There was in some more than a touch of the graceful, fascinating mysticism of Shelley, the passionate outcry of a strong, noble mind, seeking to wrest from Nature her vast secrets and to fathom the mysteries of existence; the wail of bewildered nobility of soul turning in despair from the cold creeds of modern religion to seek some other and higher form of spiritual life.

I read on until the sun had gone down and the shades of twilight had chased the afterglow from the western sky. Then I closed the book and rose suddenly with a great start.

Scarcely a dozen yards away, on the extreme summit of the hill, a man on horseback sat watching me. His unusually tall figure and the fine shape of the coal-black horse which he was riding, stood out against the background of the distant sky with a vividness which seemed almost more than natural. Such a face as his I had never seen, never imagined. I could neither describe it, nor think of anything with which to compare it.

Dark, with jet-black hair, and complexion perfectly clear, but tanned by Southern suns; a small, firm mouth; a high forehead, furrowed with thought; aquiline nose; grey-blue eyes, powerful and expressive—any man might thus be described, and yet lack altogether the wonderful charm of the face into which I looked. It was the rare combination of perfect classical modelling with intensity of character and nobility of intellect. It was the face of a king among men; and yet there were times when a certain smile played around those iron lips, and a certain light flashed in those brilliant eyes, when to look into it made me shudder. But that was afterwards.

He remained looking at me and I at him, for fully a minute. Then he beckoned to me with

his whip—a slight but imperious gesture. I rose and walked to his side.

"Who are you?" he asked curtly.

"My name is Philip Morton," I answered. "I live at Rothland Wood farmhouse."

"Son of the man who was murdered?"

I assented. He gazed at me fixedly, with the faintest possible expression of interest in his languid grey eyes.

"You were very intent upon your book," he remarked. "What was it?"

I held it up.

"You should know it, sir," I answered.

He glanced at the title and shrugged his shoulders slightly. There were indications of a frown upon his fine forehead.

"You should be able to employ your time better than that," he said.

"I don't think so. I am fond of reading—especially poetry," I replied.

The idea seemed to amuse him, for he smiled, and the stern lines in his countenance relaxed for a moment. Directly his lips were parted his whole expression was transformed and I understood what women had meant when they talked about the fascination of his face.

"Fond of reading, are you? A village book-worm. Well, they say that to book-lovers every volume has a language and a mission of its own. What do my schoolboy voices tell you?"

"That you were once in love," I answered quickly.

A half-amused, half-contemptuous shade passed across his face.

"Youth has its follies, like every other stage of life," he said. "I daresay I experienced the luxury of the sensation once, but it must have been a long time ago. Come, is that all it tells you?"

"It tells me that men lie when they call you an Atheist."

He sat quite still on his horse and the smile on his lips became a mocking one.

"Atheism was most unfashionable when those verses were written," he remarked. "Any other 'ism' was popular enough, but Atheism sounded ugly. Besides, I was only a boy then. Perhaps I had some imagination left. It is a gift which one loses in later life."

"But religion is not dependent upon imagination."

"Wholly. Religion is an effort of imagination and, therefore, is more or less a matter of disposition. That is one of its chief absurdities. Women and sensitive boys are easiest affected by it. Men of sturdy common-sense, men with brains and the knowledge how to use them, are every day bursting the trammels of an effete orthodoxy."

"And what can their common-sense and their brains give them in its place?" I asked. "I cannot conceive any practical religion without orthodoxy."

"A little measure of philosophy. It is all they want. Only the faint-hearted, who have not the courage to contemplate physical annihilation, console themselves by building up a hysterical faith in an impossible hereafter. There is no hereafter."

"A horrible creed!" I exclaimed.

"By no means. Let men devote half the time and the efforts that they devote to this phantasy of religion to schooling themselves in philosophic thought, and they will learn to contemplate it unmoved. To recognise that the end of life is inevitable is to rob it of most of its terrors, save to cowards. The man who wastes a tissue of his body in regretting what he cannot prevent is a fool. Annihilation is a more comfortable doctrine

and a more reasonable one, too. Don't you agree with me, boy?"

"No; not with a single word!" I cried, growing hot and a little angry, for I could see that he was only half in earnest and I had no fancy to be made a butt of. "Imagination is not the groundwork of religion; common-sense is. Why——"

"Oh, spare me the stock arguments!" he broke in, with a slight shudder. "Keep your religion and hug it as close as you like, if you find it any comfort to you. Where have you been to school?"

"Nowhere," I answered. "I have read with Mr. Sands, the curate of Rothland."

He laughed softly to himself, as though the idea amused him, looking at me all the time as though I were some sort of natural curiosity.

"Fond of reading, are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. Fonder than I am of anything else."

"And your books—where do they come from?"

"Wherever I can get any. From the library at Mellborough, or from Mr. Sands, most of them."

He laughed again and repeated my words, as though amused.

"No wonder you're behind the times," he remarked. "Now, shall I lend you some books?"

I shook my head feebly, for I was longing to accept his offer.

"I'm afraid your sort of books would not suit me," I said. "I don't want to be converted to your way of thinking. It seems to me that there is such a thing as overtraining of the mind."

"So you look upon me as a sort of Mephistopheles, eh? Well, I've no ambition to make a convert of you. To be a pessimist is to be——"

"An unhappy man," I interrupted eagerly, "and a very narrow-minded one, too. It is a city-born creed. No one could live out here in the country and espouse it!"

"Boy, how old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Seventeen next birthday, sir," I answered.

"You have a glib tongue—the sign of an empty head, I fear."

"Better empty than full of unhealthy philosophy," I answered bluntly.

He laughed outright.

"The country air has sharpened your wits, at any rate," he said. "You're a fool, Philip Morton; but you will be happier in your folly than other men in their wisdom. There's a great deal of comfort in ignorance."

He gave me a careless yet not unkind nod and, wheeling his great horse round with a turn of the wrist, galloped down the hillside and across the soft, spongy turf at a pace which soon carried him out of sight. But I stood for a while on a piece of broken rock on the summit of the hill gazing after his retreating figure, and watching the twinkling lights from the many villages stretched away in the valley below. The sound of his low, strong voice yet vibrated in my ears, and the sad, beautiful face, with its languid grey eyes and weary expression, seemed still by my side. Already I began to feel something of the influence which this man appeared to exercise over everyone whom he came near; and I felt vaguely, even then, that if suffered to grow, it would become an influence all-powerful with me.

When I reached home it was late—so late that my mother, who seldom betrayed any interest or curiosity in my doings, asked me questions. I felt a curious reluctance at first to tell her with whom I had been talking, and it was justified when I saw the effect which my words had upon her. A look almost of horror filled her eyes and her face was white with anger. It was as though a long-expected blow had fallen.

"At last! at last!" she murmured to herself, as though forgetful of my presence. Then her eyes closed and her lips moved softly. It seemed to me that she was praying.

I was bewildered and inclined to be angry that she should carry her dislike of Mr. Ravenor so far. Did she think me so weak and impressionable that a few minutes' conversation with any man could bring me harm?

"You carry your dislike of Mr. Ravenor a little too far, mother," I ventured to say. "What can you know of him so bad that you see danger in my having talked with him for a few minutes?"

She looked at me fixedly and grew more composed.

"It is too late now, Philip," she said, in a low tone. "The mischief is done. If I could have foreseen this we would have gone away."

"To have avoided Mr. Ravenor?" I cried, wondering.

"Yes."

CHAPTER VI.

A DOUBTFUL VISITOR.

LATE in the afternoon of the following day a visitor rode through the stack-yard and reined in his horse before our door. I was reading in the room which my mother chiefly occupied and, when I glanced out of the side-window, overhung and darkened by jessamine and honeysuckle, I had a great surprise. The book dropped from my fingers and I stood still for a moment, uncertain what to do. For outside, sitting composedly upon his fine black horse and apparently considering as to the best means of making his presence known, was Mr. Ravenor.

He saw me and, with a curt but not ungracious motion of the head, beckoned me out. I went at once and found him dismounted and standing upon the step.

"I want to see your mother, boy," he said sharply. "Is there no one about who can hold my horse? Where are all the farm-men?"

I hesitated and stood there for a moment, awkward and confused. My mother's strange words concerning him were still ringing in my ears. Supposing she refused to come down and receive, as a visitor, the man of whom she had spoken such mysterious words? Nothing appeared to me more likely. And yet what was I to do?

He watched me, as though reading my thoughts. That he was indeed doing so I very quickly discovered.

"Quick, boy!" he said. "I am not accustomed to be kept waiting. I know as well as you do that I am not a welcome visitor, but your mother will see me, nevertheless. Call one of the men!"

I passed across the garden and entered the farmyard. Jim, the waggoner, was there, turning over a manure-heap, and I returned with him at my heels. Mr. Ravenor tossed him the reins and, stooping low, followed me into our little sitting-room.

He laid his whip upon the table and, selecting the most comfortable chair, sat down leisurely and crossed his legs. He was, of course, entirely at his ease, and was watching my discomposure with a quiet, mocking smile.

"Now go and tell your mother that I desire to see her!" he commanded.

With slow steps I turned away, and, mounting the stairs, knocked at her door.

"Mother, there is a visitor downstairs!" I called out softly. "It is——"

"I know," she answered calmly. "Go away. I shall be down in a few minutes."

I went downstairs again and into the sitting-room, breathing more freely. Mr. Ravenor had not stirred, and when I entered appeared to be deep in thought. At the sound of my footsteps, however, his expression changed at once into its former impassiveness. He glanced round the room with an air of lazy curiosity and his half-closed eyes rested upon my little case of books.

"What have you there?" he inquired. "Read me out the titles."

I did so, with just an inkling of reluctance, for

my collection was altogether a haphazard one, precious though it was to me. Half-way through he checked me.

"There, that'll do!" he exclaimed, laughing softly. "This is really idyllic. 'Abercrombie' and 'Robinson Crusoe,' 'Jeremy Taylor' and 'Thomas à Kempis.' My poor boy, if you have a headpiece at all, how it must want oiling!"

I was a little indignant at his tone and answered him quickly.

"I don't know. I'm not sure that I should care for your kind of books very much."

He arched his fine eyebrows and the smile still lingered around his lips.

"Indeed! And why not? And how have you been able to divine what sort of books mine are, without having seen them?"

"Well, perhaps I don't mean that exactly," I answered, sitting on the edge of the table, and thrusting my hands deep down into my trousers pockets, with the uncomfortable sensation that I was making a fool of myself. "I was judging from what you said you were last night. If study has only brought you to pessimism, I would rather be ignorant."

"You really are a wonderfully wise boy for your years," he said, still smiling. "But you must remember that there are two distinct branches of study. One, the more popular and the more commonly recognised, leads to acquired knowledge—the knowledge of facts and sciences and languages; the other is the pure sharpening and training of the mind, by reading other men's thoughts and ideas and theories—in short, by becoming master of all the philosophical writers of all nations. Now, it is the latter which you would have to avoid in order to retain your present Arcadian simplicity; but without the

former, man is scarcely above the level of an animal."

"I think I see what you mean," I admitted. "I should like to be a good classical scholar and mathematician, and know a lot of things. It seems to me," I added hesitatingly, "that this sort of knowledge is quite sufficient to strengthen and train the mind. The other would be very likely to overtrain it and prove unhealthy, especially if it leads everyone where it has led you."

"Oh, I wanted no leading!" he said lightly. "I was born a pessimist. Schopenhauer was my earliest friend, Voltaire my teacher, and Shelley my god! Matter of disposition, of course. I had too little imagination to care a rap about cultivating a religion, and too much to be a moralist. Your mother is coming at last, then?"

The door opened and I looked up anxiously. The words of introduction which had been trembling upon my lips were unuttered. I stood as helpless and dumbfounded as a ploughboy, with my eyes fixed upon my mother.

CHAPTER VII.

A MEETING AND A METAMORPHOSIS.

THAT it was my mother I could not at first believe. She wore a plain dark dress, with a black lace kerchief about her neck; but a dress, simple though it was, of a style and material unlike any that I had ever before seen her wear. Although I knew nothing of her history, I had always suspected that she was of a very different station from my father's, and at that moment I knew it, for it seemed as though she had, of a sudden, made up her mind to assume her proper position. Not only were her dress and the fashion of arranging her hair unusual, but her manners, her voice, her whole bearing and appearance were utterly changed. It was as though she had, without the slightest warning, dropped the mask of long years, and stepped back, like a flash, into the personality which belonged to her.

Nor was this the only change. A slight pink flush had chased the leaden pallor from her cheeks, and her eyes, which had of late seemed dull and heavy, were full of sparkling light and suppressed animation. Her manners, as well as her personal appearance, all bore witness to some startling metamorphosis. I was more than astonished; I was thunderstruck. What seemed to me most wonderful was that a visit

from the man against whom she had so solemnly and passionately cautioned me should thus have galvanised her into another state of being.

Mr. Ravenor rose at her entrance and bowed with the easy grace of a man of the world. My mother returned his greeting with a stately self-possession which matched his own; but it struck me, watching them both closely, that, while he was perfectly collected, she was in reality far from being so. I could see the delicate white fingers of her left hand fold themselves convulsively around the lace handkerchief which she was carrying, and when she entered a shiver—gone in a moment and perceptible only to me, because my eyes were fastened upon her—shook her slim, lithe figure.

But in the few commonplace remarks which first passed between them there was nothing in speech or manner that betrayed the least embarrassment. She answered him as one of his own order, graciously, yet just allowing him to see that his visit was a surprise to her and that she expected him to declare its purpose. I have dwelt somewhat upon this meeting for reasons which will be sufficiently apparent when I have finished my story.

After a few remarks about the farm, the crops, and the favourable weather, he gave the wished-for explanation.

"I have come to say a few words to you about your son, Mrs. Morton," he began abruptly.

She and I looked equally astonished.

"I am a man of few words," he continued. "The few which I desire to say upon this subject had better be said, I think, to you alone, Mrs. Morton."

I would have left the room at once, but my mother prevented me. She laid a trembling hand upon my shoulder, and drew me closer to her.

"You can have nothing to say to me, Mr. Rave-

nor, which it would not be better for him to hear, especially as you say that it concerns him."

He shrugged his high, square shoulders, as though indifferent; but I fancied, nevertheless, that a shade of annoyance lingered in his face for a moment.

"Very good!" he said shortly. "Rumour may have told you, Mrs. Morton, if you ever listen to such things, that I am a very wicked man. Possibly! I don't deny it! At any rate, I am, by disposition and custom, profoundly selfish. I owe to your son a luxury—that of having found my thoughts withdrawn from myself for a few minutes—with me a most rare event.

"I met him last evening and talked with him. He talked like a fool, it is true, but that has nothing to do with it. Afterwards I thought of him again; wondered what you were going to do with him; remembered—pardon me!—that you must be poor; and remembered, also, that you have suffered through a servant of mine."

He paused. For nearly half a minute they looked one another in the face—my mother and this man. There was something in her rapt, fascinated gaze, and in the keen, brilliant light which flashed from his dark eyes as he returned it, which seemed strange to me. It was like a challenge offered and accepted—a duel in which neither was vanquished, for neither flinched.

"It occurred to me then," he continued calmly, "to call and ask you what you intended doing with him, and to plead, as excuses for the suggestion which I am about to make, the reasons which I have just stated. I am a rich man, as you know, and the money would be nothing to me. I wish to be allowed to defray the expenses of finishing your son's education."

It seemed to me a magnificently generous offer,

but a very simple one. I could not understand the agitation and apparent indecision which it caused my mother. Her prompt refusal I could have understood, although it would have been a blow to me. But this mixture of horror and consternation, of emotion and dismay, I could make nothing of. The feeling which I had imagined would surely be manifested—gratitude—was conspicuous by its absence. What did it all mean?

My mother sat down and Mr. Ravenor leaned back in his armchair, apparently content to wait for her decision. I moved across the room to her side and took her cold fingers into mine.

"Mother," I cried, with glowing cheeks and voice trembling with eagerness, "what is the matter? Why do you not say 'yes'? You know how I have wanted to go to college! There is no reason why you should not consent, is there?"

Mr. Ravenor smiled—a very slight movement of the lips.

"If your mother considers your interests at all," he said calmly, "she will certainly consent."

I was about to speak, but my mother looked up and I checked the words on my lips.

"Mr. Ravenor," she said quietly, "I accept your offer and I thank you for it. That is all I can say."

"Quite enough," he remarked nonchalantly.

"But there is one thing I should like you to understand," she added, looking up at him. "I consent, it is true; but, had it not been for another reason, far more powerful with me than any you have urged, I never should have done so. It is a reason which you do not know of—and which I pray that you never may know of," she added, in a lower key.

He made no answer; indeed, he seemed little interested in my mother's words. He turned,

instead, to me and read in my face all the enthusiasm which hers lacked. I would have spoken, but he held up his hand and checked me.

"Only on one condition," he said coldly. "No thanks. I hate them! What I do for you I do to please myself. The money which it will cost me is no more than I have thrown away many times on the idlest passing pleasure. I have simply chosen to gratify a whim, and it happens that you are the gainer. Remember that you can best show your gratitude by silence."

His words fell like drops of ice upon my impetuosity. I remained silent without an effort.

"From what you said just now," he continued, "I learn that it has been your desire to perfect your education in a fashion which you could not have done here. Have you any distinct aims? I mean, have you any definite ideas as to the future?"

I shook my head.

"I never dared to encourage any," I answered, truthfully enough. "I knew that we were poor and that I should have to think about earning my living soon—probably as a schoolmaster."

"You mean to say, then, that you have never had any distinct ambitions—everything has been vague?"

"Except one thing," I answered slowly. "There is one thing which I have always set before me to accomplish some day, but it is scarcely an ambition and it has nothing to do with a carcer."

"Tell it to me!" he commanded.

I did so, without hesitation, looking him full in the face with heightened colour, but speaking with all the determination which I felt in my heart.

"I have made up my mind that some day I will find the man Francis—the man who murdered my father!"

He was silent. I could almost have fancied that he was in some measure moved by my words, and the refined beauty of his dark face was heightened for a moment by the strange, sad look which flashed across it. Then he rose and took up his riding-whip from the table.

"A boyish enthusiasm," he remarked contemptuously, as he made his way towards the door. "Where the cleverest detectives in England have failed, you hope to succeed. Well, I wish you success. The rascal deserves to swing, certainly. You will hear further from me in a day or two. Good-morning!"

He left the room abruptly and I followed him, stepping bareheaded out into the sunshine to look about for Jim, who was leading his horse up and down the road.

When I returned, Mr. Ravenor was still standing upon the doorstep watching me intently.

"I am going back to speak to your mother for a moment," he said slowly, withdrawing his eyes from my face at last. "No; stop where you are!" he added imperatively. "I wish to speak to her alone."

I obeyed him and wandered about the orchard until I saw him come out and gallop furiously away across the park. Then I hurried into the house.

"Mother!" I exclaimed, calling out to her before I had opened the door of the parlour—"mother, what do you——"

I stopped short and hurried to her side, alarmed at her appearance. Her cheeks, even her lips, were ashen pale and her eyes were closed. She had fainted in her chair.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ABODE OF MYSTERY.

For the first time in my life I was on my way to Ravenor Castle, summoned there by a brief, imperious note from Mr. Ravenor. Often had I looked longingly from the distant hills of the park upon its grey, rugged towers and mighty battlements; but I had never dared to clamber over the high wall into the inner grounds, nor even to make my way up the servants' drive to win a closer acquaintance with it.

One reason why I had abstained from doing what, on the face of it, would seem a very natural thing to do, was a solemn promise to my mother, extracted from me almost as soon as I was able to get about by myself, never to pass within that great boundary-wall which completely encircled the inner grounds and wardens of the castle. But, apart from that, the thing would have been impossible for me, in any case.

I have already said that Mr. Ravenor bore the character of being a remarkably eccentric man. Perhaps one of the most striking manifestations of this eccentricity lay in the rigid seclusion in which he chose to live while at the Castle, and the extraordinary precautions which he had taken to prevent all intruders and visitors of every sort from obtaining access to him.

From the outer part there was indeed no attempt to exclude anyone belonging to the neighbourhood who chose to ramble about there, and in Mr. Ravenor's absence visitors who had obtained permission from the steward were occasionally permitted to drive through; but to the grounds and the Castle itself access was simply an impossibility. Had Ravenor Castle been the abode of a sovereign, and the country around in possession of a hostile people, the precautions could scarcely have been more rigorous.

The high stone wall, which encircled the Castle and gardens for a circuit of three-quarters of a mile, effectually shut them off from the outside world. The postern-gates with which it was pierced were of solid iron, and the locks which secured them were said to have been fashioned by a Hindoo whom Mr. Ravenor had once brought home with him from India, and to be perfectly unique in their design and workmanship. The two main carriage entrances, about half a mile apart, were remarkable for nothing but the fine proportions of the towering iron gates; but they were always kept jealously locked and barred, and the fate of the uninvited guest who presented himself there was inevitable. There was no admittance.

The afternoon was drawing towards a close when I turned the last corner of the winding avenue and approached the entrance. It had been a wild, blustering day; but just before I started from home the wind had dropped and a watery sun, feebly piercing the masses of heavy clouds with which the sky was strewn, was shining down, with a wan, unnatural glow, upon the clumps of fir-trees on either side of the way and the massive, frowning towers of the Castle close above me.

Under foot and around me everything was wet. With the faintest stir of the dying breeze showers of

raindrops fell from shrubs and trees, and at every step my feet sank into the soft, soaked gravel, or sent the moisture bubbling up from the layers of rotten leaves and twigs which the morning's gale had scattered along the road.

It was an afternoon to damp anyone's spirits; and it was perhaps to the influence of the weather that I owed the sudden sinking of heart and courage which came over me as I slackened my pace before the grim-looking lodges and barred gate. I had started from home, notwithstanding my mother's white face and nervous, trembling manner, in a state of pleasurable excitement.

I was about to penetrate into a mystery which had been the curiosity of my boyhood; I was to become one of those favoured few who had been permitted to pass within the portals of Ravenor Castle; and, more than that, I was about to visit there as the guest of a man whose marvellous reputation, personality, and career had kindled within me an almost passionate reverence—a man who had long been the object of my devoted, although boyish and unreasonable, hero-worship. Yet, though it would seem that I had everything to gain and nothing to fear or lose from the coming interview, no sooner had I arrived within sight of my destination than my spirits sank to zero.

A woman would have called it a presentiment and have accepted it with mute despair. To me it seemed only an unreasonable reaction from my previous state of suppressed excitement—a feeling to be crushed at any cost, lest I should stand, with gloomy, unthankful face, before the man in whose power it lay to raise me from my present distasteful position and prospects. So I threw my head back and quickened my steps, keeping resolutely before me in my thoughts all that I had ventured to hope from my forthcoming interview; and by the time

I stood before the great iron gates and stretched out my hand to ring the bell, the depression had almost passed away, and the eagerness which I felt was, no doubt, fully reflected in my countenance.

I had no need to ring. My last quick footstep had fallen upon a harder substance than the gravel upon which I had been walking, and the contact of my feet with it made my presence known in a manner which surprised me not a little. There was a shrill ringing from the lodge door on my right, and almost simultaneously it opened and a servant came out in the dark Ravenor livery.

"Will you be so good, sir, as to step off the planking?" he said.

I moved a yard or two backwards, and the bell —it was an electric bell, of course—instantly ceased. It was my first experience of any such means of communication, and I stood for a moment looking down in some bewilderment.

"Your name and business, sir?" the man inquired respectfully. "Did you wish to see Mr. Clemson?" Mr. Clemson was the steward.

"My name is Morton, and my business is with Mr. Ravenor," I answered. "I want to see him."

"I am afraid that Mr. Ravenor will not be able to see you, sir," he said. "Have you an appointment?"

"Yes; for five o'clock," I answered. And the words had scarcely left my lips before the first stroke of the hour boomed out from the great Castle clock. Perhaps, more than anything else could have done, that sound brought home to me the realisation of where I was. Hour after hour, all through my life, from the depths of Rothland Wood, from the home meadows, or in my long rambles over the far-away Barnwood Hills, I had heard those deep, throbbing chimes; sometimes faint and low, when the wind bore the sound away

from me, sometimes harsh and piercing in the storm, and often as clear and distinct as though only a sheet of water stretched between us. And now I stood almost within a stone's throw of them, and marvelled no longer that the deep, resounding notes should travel so far over hill and moor that I had never yet been able to wander out of hearing of them.

The man accepted my explanation after a moment's hesitation, and, standing aside from the doorway out of which he had issued, motioned me to enter. I did so and received a fresh surprise. Instead of finding myself in the home of one of the servants of the estate, which would have seemed the natural thing, I found myself in a most luxuriously furnished waiting-room, hung with mirrors and oak-framed paintings upon a dark panelled wall. My feet sank into a thick carpet, and I subsided, a little dazed, into a low, crimson velvet chair, and found beside me a table covered with magazines.

The man followed me into the room, and, as he passed on his way to its upper end, he wheeled towards me a smaller table on which were decanters and glasses and a long box of cigarettes. Scarcely glancing at them, I watched him unlock a tall cupboard and half vanish inside it.

He remained there for a space of almost five minutes. Then he stepped out, carefully locked it and advanced towards me. I fancied that there was a shade more respect in his manner and certainly some surprise.

"Mr. Ravenor's servant will be here in a few minutes, sir, to show you the way to the Castle."

I thought that I could have found it very well by myself, but, of course, I could not say so. I occupied myself by examining the contents of the room, and struggled for a few moments between

a feeling of strong curiosity and a natural disinclination to ask questions of a servant, especially one whose manner seemed so little to invite them. Finally the former conquered.

"How did you find that out without leaving this room?" I asked.

He pointed to the cupboard.

"We have a telephone there in connection with the Castle, sir," he explained. Then he busied himself arranging some papers on a table at the other end of the apartment, with the obvious air of not desiring to be questioned further.

The explanation was so simple that I smiled. I began to realise the very insufficient causes which had given rise to the stories which were always floating about concerning the mystery in which the master of Ravenor Castle chose to dwell. What more natural than that a man of liberal education, with a passion for absolute solitude, should seek to insure it by some such means as these, by the application of very simple scientific devices, common enough in a city, but unheard of in our quiet country neighbourhood?

I was kept waiting for about a quarter of an hour. Then the door was opened noiselessly from without and a tall, dark man, clean-shaven and dressed in black, relieved by an immaculate white tie, entered and looked at me. I rose to my feet and threw down the magazine which I had been pretending to read.

"You are Mr. Morton?" he inquired, in a subdued tone, glancing steadily at me the while with somewhat puzzled, criticising gaze, which, perhaps unreasonably, annoyed me extremely. It was an annoyance which I took pains not to show, however, for something about the personality of the man impressed me. His manner, though studiously respectful, was not without a certain quiet dignity,

and his thin oval face—thin almost to emaciation—had in it more than a suspicion of refinement. My first glance, whilst I was undergoing his brief scrutiny, assured me that this was no ordinary servant.

"That is my name," I answered. "You have come to take me to Mr. Ravenor?"

"If you will be so good as to follow me, sir."

I took up my cap and did so, taking long, swinging strides up the steep ascent, hoping thereby to gain his side and ask him a few questions about the place. But he prevented this by hurrying on when I was close behind him; so, after the third attempt I gave it up, and contented myself by looking around me as much as I could, and making the most of the short walk.

On one side of the drive—I had been along few highways as wide—was a tall yew hedge, which shut out little from my view, for the thick black pine-wood which overtopped and formed so striking a background to the grand old Castle had never been thinned in this direction, and stretched away in a wide, irregular belt, skirting the long line of out-buildings to the hills and beyond. But on the right hand only a low ring-fence separated us from the grounds immediately in front of the Castle, which a sudden bend in the sharply winding road brought into full view.

My absolute ignorance of architecture forbids my attempting to describe it, save in its general effect. I remember even now what that effect was upon me when I stood for the first time almost at its foot. At a distance its frowning battlements and worn grey turrets had a majestic appearance; but, standing as I did then, within a few hundred yards of its vast, imposing front, and almost under the shadow of its walls and towers, its effect was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

I almost held my breath as I gazed upon it and the terrace lawns, sloping away below, smooth-shaven, velvetty, the very perfection of English turf. Not that I had much time to look about me. On the contrary, my conductor never once slackened his pace, and when I involuntarily paused for a moment, with eyes riveted upon the magnificent pile before me, he looked round sharply and beckoned me impatiently to proceed.

"Mr. Ravenor is not used to be kept waiting, sir," he remarked, "and will be expecting us."

I pulled myself together with an effort and followed him more closely. We passed under a bridge of solid masonry, moss-encrusted, and indented with the storms of ages and the ruder marks of battering-ram and cannon, across a wide, circular courtyard protected by massive iron gates, which rolled slowly open before us with many ponderous creakings and gratings, as though reluctant to admit a stranger, into a great, white, stone-paved hall, dimly lighted, yet sufficiently so to enable me to perceive the long rows of armoured warriors which lined the walls, and the lances and spears and shields which flashed above their heads.

We passed straight across it, our footsteps awakening clattering echoes as they fell on the polished flags, through a door on the opposite side, into a room which nearly took my breath away. From the high, vaulted ceiling to the floor, on every side of the apartment, were books—nothing but books.

Two men—one old, the other of about my own age—looked up from a table as we entered and paused in their work, which seemed to be cataloguing; but my guide passed them without remark or notice, and walked straight across the room to where a crimson curtain, hanging down

in thick folds, concealed a black oak door. Here he knocked, and I waited by his side until the answer came in that clear, low tone, which, though I had heard it but once or twice before, I could have recognised in a thousand. Then my guide turned the handle and, silently motioning me to enter, left me.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. MARX.

At first I had eyes only for the dark figure seated a few yards away from me at a small writing-table drawn into the centre of the room. He was bending low over his desk and never even raised his eyes or ceased writing at my entrance. Before him on the table, and scattered around his chair on the floor, were many sheets of white foolscap covered with his broad, firm handwriting, some with the ink scarcely dry upon them; and while I stood before him he impatiently swept another one from his desk and, without waiting to see it flutter to the ground, began a fresh sheet.

A glass of water, a few dry biscuits, and a little pile of books—some turned face-downwards—were by his side. Nothing else was on the table, save a great pile of unused paper, a watch detached from its chain, and a heavily-shaded lamp, which threw a ghastly light upon his white, worn face, and his dry, brilliant eyes, under which were faintly engraven the dark rims of the student.

I watched him for a while, fascinated. Then, as he took not the slightest notice of me, my eyes began to wander round the room. It was hexagonal and, on every side save one, lined from the floor to the high ceiling with books. The

furniture was all of black oak, as also were the bookshelves, and the carpet and hangings were of a deep olive-green. The mantelpiece and inlaid grate were of black marble, faintly relieved with gold, and within the polished bars of the grate a small fire was burning.

There was nothing cheerful about the apartment; on the contrary, it struck me as being, though magnificent, sombre and heavy, wrapped as it was in the gloom of a dismal twilight, which the flickering fire and the shaded lamp failed to pierce. From the high French windows, I could catch a glimpse of a long stretch of soddened lawn, beyond which everything was shrouded in the semi-obscurity of the fast-falling dusk, deepened by the grey, cloudy sky. But I chose, after my first glance around the room, to keep my eyes fixed upon the man who sat writing before me, the man in whom already I felt an interest so strong as to deaden all the curiosity which I might otherwise have felt as to my surroundings.

At last he seemed conscious of my presence. Lifting his eyes, to give them a momentary rest, he encountered my fixed gaze. For a moment he looked at me in a puzzled manner, as though wondering how I came there. Then his expression changed and, putting down his pen, he pushed his papers away from him.

"So you have come, Philip Morton," he said.

To so self-evident a statement I could return no answer, save a brief affirmative. He seemed to expect nothing more, however.

"How old did you say you were?" he asked abruptly.

"Seventeen, sir."

It was quite five minutes before he spoke again, during which time he sat with knitted brows and eyes fixed intently but absently upon me, deep in

thought, and thought of which it seemed to me somehow that I must be the subject.

"Where were you born?"

"At the farm, sir—at least, I suppose so."

It flashed into my mind at that moment that I had never heard the period of my earliest childhood spoken of either by my father or mother. But it was only a passing thought, dismissed almost as soon as conceived. Had we not always lived at the farm? Where else could I have been born?

"Do you know any of your mother's relations?" Mr. Ravenor asked, taking no notice of the qualifying addition to my previous answer.

I shook my head. I had never seen or heard of any of them, and it was a circumstance upon which I had more than once pondered. But my mother's reserved demeanour towards me of late years had checked many questions which I might otherwise have felt inclined to ask her. There was a brief silence, during which Mr. Ravenor sat with his face half turned away from me, resting it lightly upon the long, delicate fingers of his left hand.

"You are a little young for college," he said presently, in a more matter-of-fact tone; "besides which, I doubt whether you are quite advanced enough. I have decided, therefore, to send you for two years to a clergyman in Lincolnshire who receives a few pupils, my own nephew among them. He is a friend of mine, and will give some shape to your studies. There are one or two things which I shall ask you to remember when you get there," he went on.

"First, that this little arrangement between your mother, yourself, and me remains absolutely a secret among us. Also that you seek, or, at any rate, do not refuse, the friendship of my nephew, Cecil, Lord Silchester. From what I can learn I fear

that he is behaving in a most unsatisfactory manner, and, as I know him to be weak-minded and easily led, his behaviour at present and his character in the future are to a great extent dependent upon the influence which his immediate companions may have over him. You understand me ? "

I assented silently, for words at that moment were not at my command ; my cheeks were flushed, and my heart was beating with pleasure at the confidence in me which Mr. Ravenor's words implied. That moment was one of the sweetest of my life.

" I do not, of course, wish you to play the spy in any way upon my nephew," Mr. Ravenor continued, " but I shall expect you to tell me the unbiassed truth should I at any time ask you any questions concerning him ; and if you think, after you have been there some time and have had an opportunity of judging, that he would be likely to do better elsewhere, under stricter discipline than at Dr. Randall's, I shall expect you to tell me so. In plain words, Philip Morton, I ask you to take an interest in and look after my nephew."

" I will do my best, sir," I answered fervently.

" A youthful Mentor, very ! "

The words, accompanied by something closely resembling a sneer, came from neither Mr. Ravenor nor myself. Either a third person must have been in the room before my arrival and during the whole of our conversation, or he must have entered it since by some means unknown to me, for almost at my elbow, on the side remote from the door, stood the man who had broken in, without apology or explanation, upon our interview.

Both from the strange manner of his attire and on account of his personality, I could not repress

a strong curiosity in the new-comer. He was above the average height, but of awkward and ungainly figure, its massiveness enhanced by the long black dressing-gown which was wrapped loosely around him. His hair and beard were of a deep reddish hue, the former partly concealed by a black silk skull-cap, and he wore thick blue spectacles, which by no means added to the attractiveness of his face; his features—those which were visible—were good, but their effect was completely spoilt by the disfiguring glasses and his curious complexion. There was an air of power about him difficult to analyse, but sufficiently apparent, which altogether redeemed him from coarseness, or even mediocrity; and his voice, too, was good. But my impressions concerning him were very mixed ones.

He was evidently someone of account in the household, for he stood on the hearthrug with his hands thrust into his loose pockets, completely at his ease, and without making any apology for his unceremonious appearance. When I first turned to look at him he was examining me with a cold, critical stare, which made me feel uncomfortable without knowing why.

"Who is the young gentleman?" he asked, turning to Mr. Ravenor. "Won't you introduce me?"

Mr. Ravenor took up some papers lying on the table before him and began to sort them.

"It is Philip Morton, the son of the man who was murdered in Rothland Wood," he answered quietly. "I am going to undertake his education."

"Indeed! You're becoming quite a philanthropist," was the reply. "But why not send him to a public school at once?"

"Because a public school would be just the

worst place for him," Mr. Ravenor answered coldly. "His education has been good enough up to now, I dare say, but it has not been systematic. It wants shape and proportion, and Dr. Randall is just the man to see to that."

The new-comer shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't believe in private tutors," he remarked.

"That scarcely affects the question," Mr. Ravenor answered, a little haughtily. "Are you ready for me, Marx?"

"I shall be presently. I had very nearly finished when the sound of voices tempted me out to see whom you had admitted into your august presence. You have not completed the introduction."

Mr. Ravenor turned to me with a slight frown upon his fine forehead.

"Morton," he said, "this is Mr. Marx, my private secretary and collaborator."

We exchanged greetings, and I looked at him with revived interest. The man who was worthy to work with Mr. Ravenor must be a scholar indeed, and, on the whole, Mr. Marx looked it. I almost forgave him his supercilious speech and patronising manner.

"You have quite settled, then, to send this young man to Dr. Randall's?" Mr. Marx said calmly.

"I have. There are one or two more matters which I have not yet mentioned to him, so I shall be glad to see you again in half an hour," Mr. Ravenor remarked, glancing at his watch.

Mr. Marx nodded to me in a not unfriendly manner, and, lifting a curtain, which I had not noticed before, disappeared into a smaller apartment.

Mr. Ravenor waited until he was out of hearing and then turned towards me.

"I do not know whether it is necessary for me

to mention it, as you may possibly not come into contact again," he said slowly; "but in case you should do so, remember this: I wish you to have as little to do with Mr. Marx as possible. You—"

He broke off suddenly and I started and looked round, half amazed, half frightened. The continuous sound of an electric-bell, which seemed to come from within a few feet of me, was echoing through the room.

CHAPTER X.

LADY SILCHESTER.

MR. RAVENOR sat like a man stunned by a sudden shock, while the shrill ringing grew more and more imperative. Then suddenly, when I least expected it, he spoke, and the fact that his calm, even tone betrayed not the slightest sign of agitation or anything approaching to it, was a great relief to me. After all, his silence might have meant indifference.

"Go over there," he said, pointing to the corner of the room from which the sound came.

I did so and saw just before me what seemed to be a dark mahogany box let into the wall.

"Touch that knob," he commanded, "and put your ear to the tube."

I had scarcely done so when a quick, agitated voice, which I recognised as the voice of the man who had admitted me at the lodge gate, began speaking. I repeated his words to Mr. Ravenor.

"I am very sorry, sir; but while I stepped in here to announce her, Lady Silchester has driven through. She is alone."

Mr. Ravenor made no sign of annoyance or surprise. I could not tell whether the news was a relief to him, or the reverse.

"Is there any answer, sir?" I inquired.

"Yes. Tell him to come to the steward for his

wages in an hour's time and be prepared to leave this evening."

I hesitated and then repeated the words. Mr. Ravenor watched me keenly.

"You are thinking that I am a stern master," he said abruptly.

It was exactly what had been passing through my mind and I confessed it. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I like to be obeyed implicitly, and to the letter," he said. "If a quarter of the people who present themselves here to see me were allowed to pass through to my Castle, my leisure, which is of some value to me, would be continually broken in upon. Anderson has been careful hitherto, however, and this must be a lesson to him. You can tell him as you go out that I will give him one more chance."

I rose, with my cap in hand, but he waved me back.

"I have a letter to write to your mother," he said, drawing some notepaper towards him. "Wait a minute or two."

I strolled over to the high French windows and looked out upon the grey twilight. I had scarcely stood there for a moment when the sound of horses' feet and smoothly rolling wheels coming up the broad drive told me that Mr. Ravenor's visitor was at hand, and immediately afterwards a small brougham flashed past the window and, describing a semi-circle, pulled up in front of the hall door. A footman leaped down from the box and several servants stood on the steps and respectfully saluted the lady who had alighted from the carriage. A moment or two later there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," answered Mr. Ravenor, without looking up, or even ceasing his writing, for I could hear the broad quill dashing away without a pause over the notepaper.

A servant threw open the door and announced "Lady Silchester," and a tall woman, wrapped from head to foot in dark brown furs, swept past him and entered the room.

A single glance at the slim, majestic figure, and at the classical outline of her face, told me who she was and told me rightly. It was Mr. Ravenor's sister.

Mr. Ravenor rose and, without putting his pen down, welcomed Lady Silchester with cold, frigid courtesy, which she seemed determined, however, not to notice.

"Quite an unexpected visit, this, isn't it?" she exclaimed, sinking into an easy chair before the fire with a little shiver. "I never was so cold! These autumn mists are awful, and I've had a twelve-mile drive. What a dreary room you have made of this!" she added, looking round with a little shrug of her shoulders and putting her hands farther into her muff. "How can you sit here in this ghostly light with only one lamp—and such a fire, too?"

He smiled grimly, but it was not a smile which heralded any increase of geniality in his manner.

"I am not in the habit of receiving ladies here," he remarked, "and I did not expect you. Where have you come from? I thought you were in Rome."

She shook her head.

"I wish we were. We came back last week and I went straight down to the Cedars—Tom's place at Melton, you know. I don't think I've been warm since I landed in England. Just now I'm nearly frozen to death."

"I think you would find one of the rooms in the other wing more comfortable," he said, after a short pause; "besides which I am engaged at present. You dine here, of course?"

"By all means," she answered. "You wouldn't send me back to Melton dinnerless, would you, even if I have come without an invitation? I am dying for a cup of tea."

"Mrs. Ross shall send you anything you want," he said. "I will ring for her."

She rose and shook out her skirts. Her eyes fell upon me.

"You have a visitor," she remarked. "I'm sorry I disturbed you."

She looked at me fixedly as I moved a few steps forward out of the deep shadows which hung about the further end of the apartment. Then she turned from me to Mr. Ravenor, who was holding open the door for her. He met her gaze steadily, with a calm, inquiring look in his deep eyes, as though wondering why she lingered.

"Won't you introduce your visitor?" she asked slowly.

He appeared wishful for her to go, yet resigned.

"Certainly," he answered, "if you wish it. Cecilia, let me present to you Mr. Philip Morton, the son of a former neighbour of mine. You may be interested to hear that Mr. Morton is about to complete his education with Dr. Randall. Morton, this is my sister, Lady Silchester."

Lady Silchester held up a pair of gold eye-glasses and looked at me steadily. I was not used to ladies, but Lady Silchester's manner did not please me, and, after a very slight bow, I drew myself up and returned her gaze without flinching. She turned abruptly away.

"Yes, I am interested—a little surprised," she said, in a peculiar tone. "Let me congratulate you, my dear brother, on——"

"Did I understand you to say that you would be ready in a quarter of an hour, Cecilia?" he interrupted calmly. "Permit me to order your

horses to be put up." And he moved across the room towards the bell and rang it.

She hesitated, bit her lip, and turned towards the door without another word. A servant stood upon the threshold, summoned by the bell.

"Let Mrs. Ross attend Lady Silchester at once," Mr. Ravenor ordered. "Her ladyship will take tea in her room, and will dine with me in the library at half-past eight."

"Very good, sir."

The door was closed and we were alone again. Mr. Ravenor returned to his letter, with his lips slightly parted in a quiet smile. I stood still, hot and uncomfortable, wondering in what possible manner I could have offended Lady Silchester. The meaning of the little scene which had just taken place was beyond my comprehension. But I knew that it had a meaning, and that I was somehow concerned in it.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CRY IN THE AVENUE.

THE letter which Mr. Ravenor had been writing to my mother was finished and sealed at last. Then he leaned back in his chair and looked steadily at me.

"I shall not see you again before you go, Philip Morton," he said, "so I wish to impress upon you once more what I said to you about my nephew, who is Lady Silchester's son, by-the-bye. I know that he is going on badly, but I wish to know how badly. Unfortunately, he has no father, and, from what I can remember of him, I should imagine that he is quite easily led, and would be very amenable to the influence of a stronger mind. If yours should be that mind—and I do not see why it should not—it will be well for him. That delightfully Utopian optimism of yours is, at any rate, healthy," he added dryly.

I felt my cheeks burn and would have spoken, but Mr. Ravenor checked me.

"Let there be no misunderstanding between us," he said. "I desire no gratitude from you and I deserve none. What I am doing I am doing for my own gratification—perhaps for my own ultimate advantage. That you are a gainer by it is purely a matter of chance. The whim might just as well have been the other way. I might have taken a

fancy to have you turned out of the place and, if so, I would have done it. On the whole, it is I who should be grateful to you for not baulking me in my scheme and for letting me have my own way. So understand, please, after this explanation, that I shall look upon any expression of gratitude from you as a glaring mark of imbecility, apart from which it will annoy me exceedingly."

I listened in silence. What could one reply to such a strange way of putting a case? Mr. Ravenor's manner forbade any doubt as to his seriousness and I could only respect his wishes.

"As you won't let me thank you, sir, I think I'd better go," I said bluntly. "I'm sure to forget if I stay here much longer."

"A good discipline for you to stay, then," he answered.

Again the tinkle of the telephone bell rang out from the corner and interrupted his speech. Mr. Ravenor motioned me towards it.

"Go and hear what it is and repeat it to me," he said.

I put my ear to the tube and repeated the words as they came:

"A man desires to see you, sir, but refuses to give his name. I have told him that it is quite useless my communicating with you without it; but he is persistent and refuses to go away. He is respectably dressed, but rather rough-looking."

Mr. Ravenor shrugged his shoulders and took up his pen, as though about to resume his writing.

"Tell him to go to the deuce!" he said briefly.

I repeated the message faithfully, but its recipient was evidently not satisfied. In less than a minute the bell sounded again.

"His name is Richards, sir—or, rather, he says he is known to you by that name—and he is very emphatic about seeing you—and, begging your

pardon, sir, a little insolent. He says that his business is of the utmost importance."

I repeated the message and stood as though turned to stone. Was my fancy playing tricks with me in the dimly-lit room, or had Mr. Ravenor's face really become ghastly and livid, like the face of a man who sees the phantom shadows of a hideous nightmare passing before his fixed gaze? I closed my eyes for a moment's relief and looked again. Surely it had been fancy! Mr. Ravenor was writing with only a slight frown upon his calm, serene face.

"Let Mr. Richards—or whatever the fellow's name is—be given to understand that I distinctly refuse to see him," he said quietly. "If he has any business with me he can write."

I repeated this and then took up my cap to go. Mr. Ravenor put down his pen and walked with me to the door. I had expected that he would have offered me his hand, but he did not. He nodded, kindly enough and held the door open while I passed out. So I went.

As I walked across the great hall on my way out I came face to face with Lady Silchester, who was thoughtfully contemplating one of a long line of oil-paintings dark with age, yet vivid still with the marvellous colouring of an old master. To my surprise she stopped me.

"Are you a judge of pictures, Mr. Morton?" she asked. "I was wondering whether that was a genuine Reynolds." And she pointed to the picture which she had been examining.

I shook my head, briefly acknowledging that I knew nothing whatever about them. I was quite conscious at the time that the question was only a feint. What was a farmer's son likely to know of the old masters?

"Ah, never mind!" she remarked, shutting up her eyeglasses with a snap. "I can ask Mr. Ra-

venor this evening. I thought, perhaps, that as you were here so often he might have talked to you about them. I know that he is very proud of his pictures."

"Had I been here often he might have done so," I answered. "As it happens, however, this is my first visit to Ravenor Castle."

"Indeed? And yet Mr. Ravenor seems to take a great interest in you. Why?"

I hesitated and wished that I could get away; but Lady Silchester was standing immediately in front of me.

"Your ladyship will pardon me," I said, "but might not your question be better addressed to Mr. Ravenor?"

She bit her lip and moved haughtily to one side. I made a movement as though to pass her, but she turned suddenly and prevented me.

"Mr. Morton," she said, a little nervously, "my brother said that you were going to Dr. Randall's, I believe?"

I admitted that such was the fact.

"I daresay you know that my son is there," she continued, "and I am afraid he's not behaving exactly as he should. Of course, we don't hear anything definite; but Cecil is very good-natured, easily led into anything, and I am a little doubtful about his companions there. Now, Mr. Morton, you're not much more than a boy yourself, of course; but you don't look as though you would care for the sort of thing that I'm afraid Cecil gets led into. I do wish that you and he could be friends, and that—that——"

She broke off, as though expecting me to say something, and I felt a little awkward.

"It's very kind of you to think so well of me, when you don't know anything about me," I said, twirling my cap in my hands; "but you forget

that I am only a farmer's son, and perhaps your son would not care to be friends with me."

"My son, whatever his faults may be, has all the instincts of a gentleman," Lady Silchester answered proudly; "and if he liked you for yourself, it would make no difference, even if you were a tradesman's son. Promise me that, if you have the opportunity, you will do what you can?"

"Oh, yes; I'll promise that, with pleasure!" I assured her.

Lady Silchester smiled, and while the smile lasted I thought that I had never seen a more beautiful woman. Then she held out a delicate little hand, sparkling with rings, and placed it in mine, which in those days was as brown as a berry and not very soft.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Morton."

She looked up at me quite kindly for a moment. Then suddenly her manner completely changed. She withdrew her eyes from my face, with a slight flush in her cheeks, and turned abruptly away.

"Good evening, Mr. Morton. I am much obliged to you for your promise," she said, in a colder tone.

I drew myself up, unconscious of having said or done anything which could possibly offend her, and feeling boyishly hurt at her change of manner.

"Good evening, Lady Silchester," I answered, with all the dignity I could command. Then I turned away and left the Castle.

I walked down the broad avenue slowly, casting many glances behind me at the vast, gloomy pile, around which the late evening mists were rising from the damp ground. Many lights were twinkling from the upper windows and from the east wing, where the servants' quarters were situated, but the lower part of the building lay in a deep obscurity, unilluminated, save by one

faint light from Mr. Ravenor's study. There seemed something unnatural, almost ghostly, about the place, which chilled while it fascinated me.

What was that? I stood suddenly still in the middle of the drive and listened. A faint, muffled cry, which seemed to me at first to be a human cry, had broken the deep evening stillness. I held my breath and remained quite motionless, with strained hearing. There was no repetition of it, no other sound. I was puzzled; more than half inclined to be alarmed. It might have been the crying of a hare, or the squealing of a rabbit caught by a stoat. But my first impression had been a strong one, improbable though it seemed. Poachers, however daring, would scarcely be likely to invade the closely-guarded inner grounds, where the preserves were fewer and the risk of capture far greater than outside the park. Besides, there had been no discharge of firearms, no commotion, no loud cries; only that one muffled, despairing moan. What could it mean?

A steep ascent lay before me. After a moment's hesitation I hurried forward and did not pause until I reached the summit and had a clear view around through the hazy twilight.

CHAPTER XII.

A DARK CORNER IN THE AVENUE.

FAR away below me—for Ravenor Castle stood on the highest point in the country—a dull-red glow in the sky, and many twinkling lights stretched far and wide, marked the place where a great town lay. On my right hand was a smooth stretch of green turf, dotted all over with thickly growing spreading oak trees. On the left was a straggling plantation, bounded by a low greystone wall, which sloped down gradually to one of the bracken-covered, disused slate-quarries, with which the neighbourhood abounded.

Breathless, I stood still and looked searchingly around. Save in the immediate vicinity, the fast falling night had blotted out the view, reducing fields, woods, and rocks to one blurred chaotic mass. But where my eye could pierce the darkness I could see no sign of any moving object. By degrees my apprehension grew less strong. The cry, if it had not been wholly a trick of the imagination, must have been the cry of some animal. I drew a long breath of relief and moved forward again.

Immediately in front of me the avenue curved through a small plantation of fir trees, which, growing thick and black on either side, made it appear almost as though I were confronted with

a tunnel; around its mouth the darkness was intense, but my eyesight, always good, had by this time become quite accustomed to the uncertain light, and just as I was entering it I fancied that I could see something moving only a few yards in front of me. I stopped short at once and waited, peering forwards into the gloom with straining eyes and beating heart. My suspense, though keen, was not of long duration, for almost immediately the dark shape resolved itself into the figure of a man moving swiftly towards me.

My first impulse was, I am afraid, to turn and run for it, my next to give the advancing figure as wide a berth as possible. With that idea I stepped swiftly on one side and leaned right back against the ring fence which bordered the drive. But I was too late, or too clumsy in my movements, to escape notice. With a quick, startled exclamation, the man whom I had nearly run into stopped and, just at that moment the moon, which had been struggling up from behind a thick mass of angry clouds, shone feebly out and showed me the white, scared face of Mr. Ravenor's secretary.

"Good heavens!"

It seemed to me as though the ejaculation was hurled out from those trembling lips. Then, with a sudden start, he recovered himself, and so changed was his manner that I could almost have fancied that his first emotion of terror had been imagination on my part.

"Am I so formidable that you should leap out of my way as though you had seen a ghost?" he said, with a short laugh. "Come, come; a young man of your size should have more pluck than that."

I felt rather ashamed of myself, but I answered him as carelessly as possible.

"I don't think I was any more startled than you were. We came upon one another suddenly, and it's a very dark night."

"Dark! Dark is not the word. This part of the drive is a veritable Hades."

"By-the-bye, Mr. Marx," I remarked, "I fancied that I heard a cry a few min——"

"A cry! What sort of a cry?" he interrupted sharply, in an altered tone.

"Well, it sounded to me very much like the moan of a man in pain," I explained, looking half fearfully around. "Of course, it might have been a hare, but it was wonderfully like a human voice. Listen! Can't you hear something now?" I cried, laying my hand upon his arm.

We stood close together in silence, listening intently. A faint wind had sprung up, and was sighing mournfully through the trees, which were soaked and weighed down by the heavy rain. Drip, drip, drip. At every sigh of the breeze a little shower of rain-drops fell pattering on to the soddened leaves and the melancholy music was resumed.

It was altogether very depressing and I was palpably shivering.

"I can hear nothing," he said, with chattering teeth. "It must have been your fancy, or a hare squealing, perhaps."

"I suppose so," I admitted, glad enough to be forced into this conclusion.

"I wouldn't say anything about it at the lodge," he remarked, preparing to depart. "Anderson is as nervous as a cat already."

"All right, I won't. Good night."

"You're not frightened, are you?" he asked. "If you like, I'll walk down to the lodge with you."

"Not in the least, thanks," I answered, a little

indignantly. "I thought that noise was queer, that's all. Good night."

I walked swiftly away, listening all the time, but hearing no unusual sound. In a few minutes I reached the gates and found Anderson waiting about outside. He let me through at once.

"May I go in here for a minute?" I asked, pointing to the room in which I had been kept waiting on my way up to the Castle. "I have a message to give you from Mr. Ravenor."

"Certainly, sir," he answered, opening the door.

I stepped inside, half expecting to see the man whom Mr. Ravenor had refused to receive; but it was quite empty.

"So Mr. Richards has decided not to wait, after all?" I remarked, looking round. "He was wise. I'm sure Mr. Ravenor wouldn't have seen him."

"Yes, sir," the man answered; "he slipped out without leaving any message or anything, while I had gone across the way for some coal. I was a bit taken aback when I returned and found the place empty, for he'd been swearing ever so a minute or two before that he'd see Mr. Ravenor, or stop here for ever."

"He can't have gone on up to the Castle, can he?" I asked, looking around.

The man shook his head confidently.

"Impossible, sir! The gates were locked and the keys in my pocket, and there are no windows to this room, you see, on the Castle side."

"But there is a door," I said, pointing to the upper end of the apartment.

"Go and look at it, sir," Anderson answered, smiling.

I did so and examined it closely. There were no bolts, but it was fastened with a particularly strong patent lock.

"Who keeps the key?" I inquired.

"Mr. Ravenor, sir. I haven't got one at all. You were saying something about a message?"

"Yes. Mr. Ravenor was annoyed with you for letting Lady Silchester through, but he has decided to overlook it this time. You need not go up to the Castle for your money."

The man was evidently pleased.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, sir," he said warmly. "That's good news and no mistake. It isn't a place that one would care to lose."

"Well, good night, Anderson. Oh, I say," I added, turning back on a sudden impulse, "how long is it since Mr. Marx was here?"

Anderson looked puzzled.

"Mr. Marx, sir! Why, I haven't seen him all day!"

"What!" I exclaimed.

"I haven't seen him all day. He hasn't been here," the man repeated.

I stood still, breathless, full of swiftly rising but vague suspicions.

"Not seen him to-day! Why, I met him in the avenue just now," I declared.

"I daresay, sir," the man remarked quietly. "He often walks down this way. In fact, he does most evenings before dinner. Queer sort he is, and no mistake."

The man's words changed the current of my thoughts, and my half-conceived suspicions faded away almost before they had gathered shape. I made some trifling remark and started homewards.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CLOUD BETWEEN US.

It was late when I reached home and, from the darkness in all the windows, I concluded that my mother and the one country domestic who comprised our little household had already retired. My hand was raised to rap at the closed door, when it occurred to me that I might just as well effect an entrance without disturbing anyone. Our sitting-room window opened on to the front garden in which I stood and was seldom fastened, so I stole softly over the sodden grass and pressed the sash upwards. It yielded easily to my touch and, gently raising myself on to the low stone window-sill, I vaulted into the room.

At first I thought it was, as I had expected to find it, empty. But it was not so. Through the open window by which I had just entered the moonlight was streaming in, casting long, fantastic rays upon the well-worn carpet and across the quaint, old-fashioned furniture and on the white tablecloth, on which my homely evening meal had been left prepared. But my eyes never rested for a moment on any of these familiar objects, scarcely even noticed them, for another and a stranger sight held me spellbound. At the farther end of the room, where the shadows hung darkest and the moon-

beams but feebly penetrated, was the kneeling figure of a woman.

Her perfectly black dress threw the ghastly hue of her strained, wild face into startling prominence, and her slender arms were stretched passionately upwards in a gesture full of intense dramatic pathos. Her eyes were fixed upon a small ebony crucifix which hung against the wall, and the words were bursting from her white, trembling lips, but whether of prayer or confession, I could not, or, rather, would not, hear, for I closed my eyes and the sound of her voice reached me only in an indistinct moan. It was a sight which has lived in my memory and will never fade.

Since that awful night in Rothland Wood, my mother's behaviour towards me had been a source of constant and painful wonder. She had become an enigma, and an enigma which I somehow felt that it would be well for me not to attempt to solve.

But even at the times when my loveless surroundings and her coldness had plunged me into the lowest depths of depression, it had never been an altogether hopeless state, for somehow I had always felt that her coldness was not the coldness of indifference, but rather an effort of will, and that a time would come when she would cast it off and be to me again the mother of my earlier recollections. But the change was long in coming.

She was a devout Roman Catholic—a religion in which I had not been brought up—and in all weathers and at all times of the year, she paid long and frequent visits to the monastery chapel over the hills. But to see her as she was now was a revelation to me. I had seen her pray before, but never like this. She had always seemed to me more of a martyr than a sinner and her prayers more the prayers of reverent devotion than of

passionate supplication. But her attitude at this moment, her wild, haggard face, and imploring eyes, were full of revelation to me. Another possible explanation of her lonely, joyless life and deep religious devotion flashed in upon me. Might it not be the dreary expiation, the hard penance of her church meted out for sin?

Half fearing to disturb her, I remained for a brief while silent, but, as the minutes went on, the sight of her agony was too much for me and I cried out to her:

"Mother, I am here. I did not know that you were up! I came in through the window!"

At the first sound of my appealing tones her face changed, as though frozen suddenly from passionate expressiveness to cold marble. Slowly she rose to her feet and confronted me.

"Mother, are you in trouble?" I said softly, moving nearer to her; "cannot I share your sorrow? Cannot I comfort you? Why am I shut out of your life so? Tell me this great trouble of yours and let me share it."

For many years I had longed to say these words to her, but the cold impressiveness of her manner had checked them often upon my lips and thrust them back to my aching heart. Now, when a great sorrow filled her face with a softer light and loosened for a moment its hard, rigid lines, I dared to yield to the impulse which I had so often felt—and, alas! in vain—in vain!

Keener agony, deeper disappointment, I have never felt. Coldness and indifference had been hard to bear, but what came now was worse. She shrank back from me—shrank back, with her hands outstretched towards me and her head averted.

"Philip, I did not know that you were here.

I cannot talk to you now. Go to your room. To-morrow—to-morrow!"

Her voice died away, but her sudden weakness inspired me with no hope, for it was a physical weakness only. There were no signs of softening in her face, no answering tenderness in her tones. So what could I do but go?

CHAPTER XIV.

A MEETING IN THE COFFEE-ROOM.

It was eleven o'clock on the following morning. I had been reading in the garden for some time, and was just thinking of starting for a walk, when a dogcart from the Castle stopped at the gate, and Mr. Ravenor's servant—the man who had conducted me from the lodge to the Castle—was shown into the house. I went to him at once and he handed me a note.

"Mr. Ravenor has sent you this, sir," he said respectfully.

I tore it open and read (there was no orthodox commencement):

"Before going to Dr. Randall's there are a few things which you are not likely to have which you will find necessary. Remember that it is part of the education which I intend for you that you should associate with the other pupils on equal terms. Therefore, be so good as to go into Torchester with Reynolds and place yourself entirely in his hands. He has my full instructions. —R."

I folded the note up and put it into my pocket.

"Am I to come with you now?" I asked.

"If you please, sir."

I went upstairs to get ready and in a few minutes

was prepared to start. The groom offered me the reins, but I declined them and mounted instead to the vacant seat by his side, which Reynolds had silently relinquished to me.

Torchester was scarcely a dozen miles from the farm, but, nevertheless, this was my first visit to it. Many a time I had looked down from Beacon Hill upon the wide-spreading, dirty-coloured cloud of smoke from its tall factory chimneys, which seemed like a marring blot upon the fair, peaceful stretch of country around, and by night at the dull red glow in the sky and the myriads of twinkling lights which showed me where it stood. But neither by day nor night had the scene been an attractive one for me. I had felt no curiosity to enter it. I had never even cared to figure to myself what it would be like.

So now, for the first time in my life, I found myself driving through the streets of a large manufacturing town. It was the dinner-hour and on all sides the factories were disgorging streams of unhealthy-looking men and women and even children. The tramcars and omnibuses were crowded, the busy streets were lined with swiftly rolling carriages, smart-looking men, and gaily-dressed girls and women. Within a few yards I saw types of men and women so different that it seemed impossible that they could be of the same species.

"This is the 'Bell,' sir, where we generally put up," remarked Reynolds, at my elbow. "You will have some lunch, sir, before we go into the town?"

I shook my head, but he was quietly though respectfully insistent. So I let him have his way and allowed myself to be piloted into a long, dark coffee-room, where my orders, considerably augmented by Reynolds in transit, were received by

a waiter whom we discovered fast asleep in an easy-chair, and who seemed very much surprised to see us.

Afterwards we went out in the town, Reynolds and I, and began our shopping. I was measured at the principal tailor's for more clothes than it seemed possible for me to wear out in a lifetime, from riding-breeches to a dress-coat; and the quantity and variety of hats, boots, shirts, and ties which Reynolds put down as indispensable filled me with half-amused astonishment, although I had made up my mind to be surprised at nothing. But our shopping was not finished even when Reynolds, to my inexpressible relief, declared my wardrobe to be as complete as could be furnished by a provincial town. The gunsmith's, the sporting emporium, and the horse-repository were all visited in turn. And when we returned to the hotel about six o'clock I was the possessor of two guns, which were a perfect revelation to me, a cricket-bat, a tennis racquet, a small gymnasium, a set of foils, and, besides other things, a stylish, well-built dogcart and a sound, useful cob.

I sank into an easy-chair in the coffee-room and, refusing to listen to Reynold's suggestion as to the propriety of dining before setting out homewards, ordered a cup of tea. While the waiter had left the room to fetch it I strolled to the window to look out at the weather, which had been threatening for some time and on my way I discovered that I was not alone in the apartment. A man was seated at one of the furthermost tables, dining, and as I passed he looked up and surveyed me with a cool, critical stare, which changed suddenly into a pleasant smile of recognition.

"Mr. Morton, isn't it?" he said, holding out

his hand. "Mr. Ravenor told me that I should probably come across you."

I was so surprised that for a moment I forgot to accept the offered hand. Mr. Ravenor's secretary was the last person whom I should have expected to find eating a solitary dinner in a Torchester hotel.

CHAPTER XV.

A TÊTE-À-TÊTE DINNER.

"WHAT have you been up to in Torchester, eh? Shopping?" Mr. Marx inquired. I saw no reason for concealing anything from him, nor did I do so. Rather awkwardly I told him of Mr. Ravenor's note to me, and that I had been with Reynolds all the afternoon. Perhaps I spoke with a little enthusiasm of our somewhat elaborate purchases. At any rate, when I had finished, he laughed softly to himself—a long, noiseless, but not unpleasant laugh.

"Well, I'm glad I met you," he said, his lips still twitching, as though with amusement. "Sit down and have some dinner with me."

I hesitated, for just at that moment Mr. Ravenor's words concerning his secretary flashed into my mind. Besides, I was not at all sure that I liked him. But, on the other hand, what alternative was there for me? What excuse could I find for declining so simple an invitation? In a few minutes the waiter would appear with the modest meal which I had ordered, and it would be impossible for me to order him to set it down in another part of the room, or to leave it and walk out of the hotel, just because this man was there. To do so would be to tell him as plainly as possible that I had some particular desire for

avoiding him, and he would instantly divine that I was obeying a behest of Mr. Ravenor's. No; it was unavoidable. I had better accept his invitation, and, briefly, I did so.

"That's right," he said pleasantly. "It's a queer fancy of mine, but I hate dining alone. Waiter, bring some more soup at once. This gentleman will dine with me."

During dinner our conversation was interrupted. Hat in hand, Reynolds was standing before us, looking at Mr. Marx and then at me and the table before us with a look on his face which I did not altogether understand, although it annoyed me excessively. He spoke to me:

"The dogcart has come round, sir."

I half rose and threw down my napkin, though with some reluctance. I held out my hand regretfully to Mr. Marx, but he refused to take it.

"You needn't go home with Reynolds unless you like," he said. "I have a brougham from the Castle here, and I can drop you at the farm on my way home."

I hesitated, for the temptation to stay was strong. In fact, I should have accepted at once, only that Reynolds's grave, frowning face somehow reminded me of Mr. Ravenor's injunction. Reynolds, like a fool, settled the matter.

"I think Mr. Morton had better return with me, sir," he said to Mr. Marx. "If you are ready, sir," he added to me. "The mare gets very fidgety if she's kept waiting."

My boyish vanity was wounded to the quick by the style of his address, and his unwise assumption of authority, and I answered quickly:

"You'd better be off at once, then, Reynolds. I shall accept Mr. Marx's offer."

He was evidently uneasy and made one more effort.

"I think Mr. Ravenor would prefer your returning with me, sir," he said.

Mr. Marx had been leaning back in his chair, sipping his coffee somewhat absently, and to all appearance altogether indifferent as to which way I should decide. He looked up now, however, and addressed Reynolds for the first time.

"How the deuce do you know anything about what your master would prefer?" he said coolly.

Reynolds made no answer, but looked appealingly at me. I chose not to see him.

"I should imagine," Mr. Marx continued, leaning back in his chair again and deliberately stirring his coffee, "that if Mr. Ravenor has any choice about the matter at all, which seems to me very unlikely, he would prefer Mr. Morton's riding home in safety with a dry skin. Listen!"

We did so, and at that moment a fierce gust of wind drove a very deluge of rain against the shaking window-panes.

"That decides it!" I exclaimed. "I'll accept your offer, Mr. Marx, if you don't mind."

"By far the more sensible thing to do," he remarked carelessly. "Have a glass of wine, Reynolds, before you start. You've a wet drive before you."

Reynolds shook his head, and, wishing me a respectful good evening, withdrew.

Mr. Marx watched Reynolds leave the room and then shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Honest, but stupid. Well, now you're in my charge, Morton, I must see whether I can't amuse you somehow. Ever been to the theatre?"

I could not help a slight blush as I admitted that I had never even seen the outside of one.

Mr. Marx looked at me after my admission as though I were some sort of natural curiosity.

"Well, we'll go if you like," he said. "There's

a very good one here, I believe, for the provinces, and it will be a change for you."

"It will make us very late, won't it?" I ventured to say.

"Not necessarily. I suppose it will be over about half-past ten and the carriage can meet us at the door."

I said no more, for fear that he would take me at my word and give up the idea of going. In a few minutes Mr. Marx called for his bill and settled it, and, glancing at his watch, declared that it was time to be off. The waiter called a hansom, and we drove through the busy streets, Mr. Marx leisurely smoking a fragrant cigarette, and I leaning forward, watching the hurrying throngs of people, some pleasure-seekers, but mostly just released from their daily toil at the factory or workshop.

It was a wet night and the streets seemed like a perfect sea of umbrellas. The rain was coming down in sheets, beating against the closed glass front of our cab and dimming its surface, until it became impossible to see farther than the horse's head. I leaned back by Mr. Marx's side with a sigh, and found that he had been watching me with an amused smile.

"Busy little place, Torchester," he remarked.

"It seems so to me," I acknowledged. "I have never been in any other town except Mellborough."

"Lucky boy!" he exclaimed, half lightly, half in earnest. "You have all the pleasures of life before you, with the sauce of novelty to help you to relish them. What would I not give never to have seen Paris or Vienna, or never to have been in love, or tasted quails on toast! But here we are at the theatre!"

CHAPTER XVI

MISS MABEL FAY.

The cab pulled up with a jerk underneath a long row of brightly burning lights. We dismounted, and I followed Mr. Marx up a broad flight of thickly carpeted stairs into a semi-circular corridor draped with crimson hangings and dimly lit with rose-coloured lights. A faint perfume hung about the place, and from below came the soft melody of a rhythmical German waltz which the orchestra was playing. I almost held my breath, with a curious mixture of expectation and excitement, as I followed Mr. Marx and an attendant down the corridor.

The latter threw open the door of what appeared to be a little room and we entered. Mr. Marx at once moved to the front, and, throwing the curtains back, beckoned me to his side. I obeyed him and looked around in wonder.

It happened to be a fashionable night and the place was crammed. On the level with us—we were in a box—were rows of men and women in evening attire; above, a somewhat disorderly mob in the gallery; and below, a dense throng—at least, it seemed so to me—of seated people were betraying their impatience for the performance by a continual stamping of feet and other rumbling noises.

To a regular playgoer it was a very ordinary sight indeed; to me it was a revelation. I stood at the front of the box, looking round, until Mr. Marx, smiling, pushed a chair up to me and bade me sit down. Then I turned towards the stage and remained with my eyes fixed upon the curtain, longing impatiently for it to rise.

Alas for my expectations! When at last the time came it was a charming picture indeed upon which I looked, but how different! A group of girls in short skirts and picturesque peasant attire moving lightly about the stage and singing; a man in uniform making passionate love to one of them, who was coyly motioning him away with her hand and bidding him stay with her eyes. A pretty picture it all made and a dazzling one. But what did it all mean?

Mr. Marx had been watching my face, and leaned over towards me with a question upon his lips.

"What does it all mean?" I whispered. "This isn't a play, is it? I don't remember one like it."

"A play? No; it's a comic opera," he answered.

I turned away and watched the performance again. I suppose I looked a little disappointed; but by degrees my disappointment died away. It was all so fresh to me.

Towards the close of the first act, in connection with one of the incidents, several fresh characters —amongst them the girl who was taking the principal part—appeared on the stage. There was a little round of applause and I was on the point of turning to make some remark to Mr. Marx, when I heard a sharp, half-suppressed exclamation escape from his lips and felt his hot breath upon my cheek.

I looked at him in surprise. He had risen from

his chair and was standing close to my elbow, leaning over me, with eyes fixed upon the centre of the stage and an incredulous look on his pale face. Instinctively I followed the direction of his rapt gaze. It seemed to me to be bent upon the girl who had last appeared, and who, with the skirts of her dark-green riding-habit gathered up in her hand, was preparing to sing.

He recovered from his surprise, or whatever emotion it was, very quickly, and broke into a short laugh. But I noticed that he pushed his chair farther back into the box and drew the curtains a little more forward.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Marx?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and frowned a little.

"Nothing at all. I fancied that I recognised a face upon the stage, but I was mistaken. Good-looking girl, isn't she—the one singing, I mean?"

I thought that good-looking was a very feeble mode of expression, and I said so emphatically. In fact, I thought her the most beautiful and most graceful creature I had ever seen; and, as the evening wore on, I found myself applauding her songs so vigorously that she glanced, smiling, into our box, and Mr. Marx, who was still sitting behind the curtain, looked at me with an amused twitching of the lips.

"Morton, Morton, this won't do!" he exclaimed, laughing. "You'll be falling head over ears in love with that young woman presently."

I became in a moment very red and uncomfortable, for she had just cast a smiling glance up at us and Mr. Marx had intercepted it. I was both ashamed and angry with myself for having applauded so loudly as to have become noticeable; but Mr. Marx seemed to think nothing of it.

'There is a better way of showing your appre-

ciation of that young lady's talents—Miss Mabel Fay, I see her name is—than by applause. See these flowers ? "

I turned round and saw a large bouquet of white azaleas and roses, which the attendant must have brought in.

" You can give them to her if you like," Mr. Marx suggested.

I shook my head immediately, fully determined that I would do nothing of the sort. But Mr. Marx was equally determined that I should. It was quite the correct thing, he assured me ; he had sent for them on purpose and I had only to stand up and throw them to her. While he talked he was writing on a plain card, which he pinned to the flowers and then thrust them into my hand.

How it happened I don't quite know, but Mr. Marx had his own way. It was the close of the act and everyone was applauding Mabel Fay's song. She stood facing the house, bowing and smiling, and her laughing eyes met mine for a moment, then rested upon the flowers which I was holding and finally glanced back into mine full of mute invitation.

I raised my hand. Mr. Marx whispered, " Now ! " And the bouquet was lying at her feet. She picked it up gracefully, shot a coquettish glance up towards me, and then the curtain fell, and I sat back in my chair, feeling quite convinced that I had made an utter fool of myself.

About the middle of the third act Mr. Marx rose and walked to the door. Holding it open in his hand for a moment, he paused and looked round.

" I am going to leave you for a few minutes," he said. " I shall not be very long."

Then he went and I heard him walk down the corridor.

An hour passed and he did not return. The

last act came, the curtain fell and, with a sigh of regret, I rose to go. Still he had not come back.

I put on my coat and lingered about, uncertain what to do. Then there came a knock at the box-door, but, instead of Mr. Marx, an attendant entered, and handed me a note. I tore it open and read, hastily scrawled in pencil:

"I am round at the back of the house. Come to me. The bearer will show you the way.—M."

CHAPTER XVII.

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE TORCHESTER THEATRE.

I FOLLOWED my guide to the end of the corridor, through a door which he unlocked and carefully locked again, and past the side of the deserted stage, on which I paused for a moment to gaze with wonder at the array of ropes and pulleys and runners which the carpenters were busy putting to rights, and at the canvas-covered, unlit auditorium, which looked now—strange transformation—like the mouth of some dark cavern. After picking our way carefully, we reached a door on which was painted "Manager's Room." A voice from inside bade us enter and I was ushered in.

Mr. Marx was seated in an easy-chair, talking somewhat earnestly to a slim, dark young man, who was leaning against the mantelpiece. An older man was writing at a table at the other end of the room, with his back to the door.

Mr. Marx welcomed me with a nod, and introduced me briefly to the young man by his side:

"Mr. Morton—Mr. Isaacs. Mr. Isaacs is the manager of the company who are playing here."

Mr. Isaacs turned an unmistakably Jewish face towards me and extended his hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Morton! Hope you

liked the performance," he said, with a smile, which disclosed the whole of a very white set of teeth. "Very fair, wasn't it? Ha, ha, ha!"

I replied that I had enjoyed it exceedingly, and looked at Mr. Marx, wondering how long he meant to stay. I had taken a sudden but strong dislike to Mr. Isaacs.

"Shall you be very long, Mr. Marx?" I asked.

"I have sent for the carriage," he answered; "it will be here in ten minutes."

It seemed to me that there was something a little strange in Mr. Marx's manner and the way in which he kept glancing towards the door.

Just at that moment someone knocked at the door.

"Come in!" cried Mr. Isaacs.

A lady obeyed his summons and swept into the room with a most unnecessary rustling of silk skirts. Mr. Isaacs welcomed her effusively.

"Miss Fay, your most humble servant!" he exclaimed, bowing low. "Let me introduce two of my friends, Mr. Morton and Mr. Marx."

The lady put out her ungloved hand, covered with a profusion of rings.

"I know this young gentleman by sight," she said, in a loud and rather high-pitched tone. "You threw me those lovely flowers, didn't you? So good of you—awfully good! I've sent them home by my young woman."

I stammered out some incoherent response and heartily wished myself a hundred miles away. What a disenchantment it was! I looked at her thickly pencilled eyebrows, at the smeared powder and paint which lay thick upon her face; at her bold, staring eyes, the crow's-feet underneath, which art had done what it could to conceal and failed; at the masses of yellow hair, which intuitively I knew to be false, and I felt my cheeks

burn with shame that I should have been tricked into admiring her for a moment. Unfortunately, she put down my embarrassment to another cause, for it seemed partly to gratify, partly to amuse her.

"My young friend and I admired your performance equally, Miss Fay, although, perhaps, he was the more demonstrative," said Mr. Marx, coming forward. "Will you accept the congratulations and thanks of a provincial who seldom has the pleasure of seeing such acting or hearing such a voice?"

She thanked him with an affected little laugh, which suddenly died away and she looked into his face intently.

"Haven't we met before?" she asked curiously. "There is something about your face or voice which seems familiar to me."

He returned her gaze steadily, but shook his head with a slight smile.

"I am afraid I may not claim that honour," he said. "If we had there could not possibly have been any uncertainty in my mind about it. It would have been a treasured memory."

She looked doubtful, but turned away carelessly.

"I suppose it is my mistake, then," she remarked. "You certainly seem to remind me of someone whom I have known. Fancy, perhaps. Mr. Isaacs, I came to beg for your escort home." (Here she shot a quick glance at me, which made my cheeks hot again.) "I have sent Julia on, and I can't go alone, can I, Mr. Morton?" she asked, turning to me.

"I—I suppose not," I answered, devoutly wishing that Mr. Marx would take his departure. But, as though on purpose, he had gone to the other

end of the room and had his back turned towards me.

There was a brief silence. Mr. Isaacs glanced at me, whistled softly to himself, and then strolled slowly over to the window, as though to see what sort of a night it was. Miss Fay glanced at me impatiently, with a slight contraction in her eyebrows. I longed desperately to get away, but for the life of me could think of no excuse.

"You won't offer your escort, then, Mr. Morton?" she whispered.

"I can't. I don't know the town—never was here before—and we have a twelve-mile drive before us. We are expecting the carriage every moment. Ah, there it is!" I added, with a sudden sense of relief, as I heard the sound of horses' feet stamping and pawing outside and the jingling of harness. "Mr. Marx, Burdett has come!" I called out.

He looked up, frowning.

"All right; there's no hurry!" he said. "If you're not ready, pray don't study me. I should enjoy a cigar and a brandy-and-soda down at the 'Bell' before we start."

"I'm quite ready, thanks," I answered slowly, for his words and manner had given me something to think about. "If you don't mind, I should like to be getting away. It's a long way, you know."

"Oh, pray don't let me detain you!" Miss Fay exclaimed, tossing her head. "Mr. Isaacs, if you're ready, I am. Good-night, Mr. Marx; good-night, Mr. Morton!"

She drew me a little on one side—a manœuvre which I was powerless to prevent—and whispered in my ear:

"You shy, stupid boy! There!"

She shook hands with me again and left some-

thing in my palm. When they were gone and I was in the passage, I looked at it. It was a plain card and on it was hastily scribbled an address:

Miss Mabel Fay,
15, Queen Street.

I felt my cheeks flush as I tore it into pieces and flung them on the ground. Then I followed Mr. Marx out to the carriage and, leaning back among the cushions by his side, I began seriously to consider an idea which every trifling incident during the latter part of the evening had pointed to; Mr. Marx had deliberately tried to lead me into making a fool of myself with Miss Mabel Fay. Why?

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT MIDNIGHT ON THE MOOR.

We were more than half-way home before Mr. Marx broke a silence which was becoming oppressive.

"Well, have you enjoyed your evening?" he asked.

"Of course I have, and I'm very much obliged to you for taking me to the theatre," I added. After all, perhaps I was misjudging him. What possible motive could he have for being my enemy?

"Oh, that's all right," he declared, carefully lighting a cigar and throwing the match out of the window. "I'm afraid you've had more than one illusion dispelled this evening, though," he went on, smiling. "You must have had plenty of time and opportunity, too, for weaving them, out here all your life. Have you never been away to visit your relations, or anything of that sort?"

I shook my head.

"I don't believe I have any relations," I said. "I never heard of any. My father used to say that he was the last of his family."

"But your mother? Surely you know some of her people?"

"I have never even heard her speak of them," I answered shortly.

"Strange! You don't happen to remember her maiden name, do you?"

"I don't know that I ever heard it," I told him.

I began to wish that Mr. Marx would choose some other topic of conversation. Doubtless, it was exceedingly kind of him to take so much interest in my affairs and his questions proceeded from perfectly genuine motives, but my inability to answer any of them was becoming a little embarrassing.

"One more question I was going to ask you and it shall be the last," he said, as though divining my feeling. "Were you born here?"

"I suppose so. I never heard that I was born anywhere else."

There was another long silence and it seemed to me that Mr. Marx was very deep in thought. I was beginning to feel sleepy and, closing my eyes, I leaned right back among the soft, yielding cushions.

It was one of the wildest and roughest nights of the year. Both the carriage-windows were streaming with raindrops, and we could hear the wind howling across the open country, and whistling mournfully among the leafless trees.

We had accomplished about three-quarters of our journey and had just entered upon the blackest part of it. On either side of the road and running close up to it, without even the division of hedges, was a stretch of bare, open country, pleasant enough in summer time, but now a mere plain, on which were dotted about a few straggling plantations of sickly, stunted fir trees, among which the hurricane was making weird music.

We were in the middle of this dreary region. Mr. Marx was still smoking his cigar, but with closed eyes, and was either dozing or deep in thought. I, with my share of the fur rug wrapped closely around my knees, was trying in vain to sleep—in vain, for my head was still in a whirl, after what had been for me such an exciting day.

Exciting though it had been, however, its close was to be more so. Suddenly, without the least warning, we felt a sharp jerk, and heard the coachman calling out to his horses, who were plunging furiously. Mr. Marx and I both leaned forward, and, just as we did so, there was a tremendous crash of breaking glass, and, through the splintered carriage window, on the side nearest to him, came a heavy piece of rock, followed by a confused mass of stones and gravel and other débris.

Mr. Marx leapt to his feet, with his hand on the door handle and the blood streaming from his forehead. Before he could open the door, however, a strange thing happened. Outside, half visible through the remains of the glass and half without any intervening obstruction, flashed for one single second the white, ghastly face of a man peering in upon us. It came and went so swiftly that I could gain only the very faintest idea of the features; but with Mr. Marx it seemed to be otherwise. Like a flash of lightning, a look passed across his face which has never died out of my memory. Every feature seemed to be dilated and shaken with a spasmodic agony of horrified recognition. For a moment he seemed struck helpless, with every power of movement and every nerve numbed. Then a low cry, such as I have never before or since heard from human throat, burst from his shaking lips

and his right hand tore open his coat and sought his breast-pocket.

The door of the carriage burst open as he sprang into the road like a wild animal, and long streaks of fire flashed from the gleaming revolver which he grasped in his hand—a lurid illumination which gave me sudden glimpses of his white, bleeding face as he stood in the road, firing barrel after barrel into the darkness.

I jumped out and hurried to his side, looking eagerly around into the dark night and together we stood and listened in a breathless silence. Across the wild, open moor the wind came rushing towards us with a deep booming sound, and among the bare tree tops of a small plantation before us we heard it shrieking and yelling like the hellish laughter of an army of witches. The ink-black clouds lowering close above our heads were dissolving in a mad torrent of rain, and the darkness was so intense that, although we could hear the frantic plunging of the horses behind us, we could neither see them nor the carriage. The elements seemed to have declared themselves on the side of our mysterious assailant. The blackness of the night and the roaring of the wind and rain blotted out all our surroundings and deadened all sound save their own.

"Wait here!" cried Mr. Marx, in a harsh, unnatural tone. And before I could open my mouth he had vanished out of sight and it seemed as though the black, yawning darkness had swallowed him up.

For a while I stood without moving. Then a cry for help from the coachman behind and the renewed sound of struggling horses reminded me of their plight, and I groped my way back to the road again.

I was only just in time. The horses, fine, power-

ful creatures, very nearly thoroughbred, were perfectly mad with fright, and the groom, who had been holding and striving to subdue them, was quite exhausted. Between us we managed to pacify them after a brief struggle, and as soon as I could find sufficient breath I began to question Burdett—who had stuck to his place on the box like an immovable statue—about the first cause of their alarm.

"What was it they shied at first?" I asked. "Did you see anyone?"

"Just catched a glimpse of the blackguard, sir, and that was all," Burdett answered. "We were a-spinning along beautiful, for they knew as they were on their way home, them animals did, when, all of a sudden like, Dandy shies, and up goes the mare on her hind legs and as near as possible pitches me into the road. I slackened the reins and laid the whip across them, while Tom jumped down. And just then I saw a figure in the middle of the road and heard a crash through the carriage window. Tom, he'd catched hold of their heads by then, which was lucky; for when the firing began they was like mad creatures and I could never have held them. It's a mercy we aren't altogether smashed up, and no mistake. The Lord save me from ever being out wi' my 'osses again on such a night as this!"

"You didn't see the face of the man who attacked us, then?" I asked eagerly.

"Not being possessed of the eyes of a heagle or a cat, sir, I did not," Burdett replied. "Just you look round and see what sort of a night it is. Why, I can only just make out your outline, sir; although I've been looking at you this five minutes, I can't see nothing of your face."

"Neither did you, I suppose, Tom?" I asked the groom.

"No, sir; nothing except just a black figure. Good thing that you was neither of you hurt, sir."

"I'm not sure that Mr. Marx isn't," I answered; "his face was bleeding a good deal. I wish he'd come back."

Never did time pass so slowly as then, when we waited in the storm and rain for Mr. Marx's return. It must have been nearly an hour before we heard him hailing us in the distance, and soon afterwards saw his figure loom out of the darkness close at hand. He was alone.

Splashed from head to foot with mud, hatless, and with great streaks of blood clotted upon his forehead and cheeks, he presented at first a frightful figure. But his face had lost that dreadful expression of numbed horror which had made it for a moment so terrible to me, and, as he sank back breathless and exhausted, among the cushions, he even attempted a smile.

"All in vain, you see," he said. "Couldn't find a single trace of anyone anywhere."

"Are you much hurt, sir?" asked the groom, who was tying up the broken carriage-door.

"Not at all. Only a scratch. Tell Burdett to drive home as fast as he can now, Tom, there's a good fellow."

We were left together to talk over this strange affair. Mr. Marx seemed to have made up his mind about it already.

"Without doubt," he said deliberately, "it was some tramp, desperate with want or drink, who made up his mind to play the highwayman. He started well, and then, seeing two of us instead of one, funked it and bolted. I don't think I ever had such a start in my life."

"You came off the worst," I remarked, pointing to his forehead.

"It wasn't that that upset me," he answered. "It was a horrible idea which flashed upon me just for a moment. The face which peered in at the window—you saw it—was horribly like the face of a man who is dead—whom I know to be dead. It gave me, just while the idea lasted, a sensation which I hope I shall never experience again as long as I live. It was ghastly."

The face of the dead! It was not a cheerful thought. But I looked at the wrecked door and window of the carriage and felt immediately re-assured. Our assailant, whoever he might have been, was no ghostly one. There was undeniable evidence of his material presence and strength in the shattered glass, the wrenched woodwork, and the wound on Mr. Marx's forehead.

The carriage pulled up with a jerk. We had reached my home.

"Hadn't you better come in and bathe your forehead, Mr. Marx?" I suggested hesitatingly.

He shook his head and declined.

"No, thanks. I'll get back to the Castle as soon as I can and doctor it myself. Good-bye, Morton. If I don't see you again before you go, I wish you every success at Mr. Randall's."

I thanked him warmly, shook his offered hand, and, shutting the carriage-door, called out to Burdett to drive on. For a moment or two I stood in the road watching the lights as they rapidly grew fainter and fainter in the distance. Then I turned slowly up the path towards the house.

Half-way there I stopped short and, holding my breath, listened intently. The wind had dropped and the rain had almost ceased, but the night was still as dark as pitch. I listened with strained ears and beating heart and soon I knew

that I had not been mistaken. Coming down the hill between Rothland Wood gate and where I was, along the road by which we had just come, I could hear the faint, but nevertheless unmistakable, sound of light, running footsteps. Turning back, I stole softly down the path and stood in the middle of the road, waiting.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE ATTACK.

It could not in reality have been more than a minute or two, although it seemed to me then a terribly long while, before I again heard the sound which had attracted my attention. When I did, it was quite close at hand, just at the beginning of the range of farm-buildings which skirted the road. There was no possibility of any mistake. The situation was sufficiently plain, at any rate. Scarcely fifty yards away a man was coming running towards me, either barefooted or with very soft shoes on; and it was past midnight, pitch dark, and a lonely road.

Nearer and nearer the steps came, and my heart began to beat very fast indeed. At last, peering earnestly through the gloom, I made out the shadowy figure of a man only a yard or two away from me, running in the middle of the road, and a pair of wild, burning eyes glistened like fire against the dark background. I felt his warm, panting breath upon my cheek, heard a low, fierce cry, and a second later saw the figure give a spring sideways and vanish in the shade of the barn wall.

I followed cautiously; but, although I groped

about in all directions, I could see nothing. So I stood quite still with my back to the wall, and called out softly:

"Who are you? Why are you hiding from me?"

No answer. I tried again:

"I don't want to hurt you. I won't do you any harm. I only want to know who you are, and what——"

I never finished the sentence. I became suddenly conscious of two glaring eyes looking at me, like pieces of live coal, from a crumpled heap on the ground. Then there was a quick, panting snort, a spring, and I felt a man's long, nervous fingers clutching my throat. Gasping and choking for breath, I flung them off, only to find myself held as though in a vice by a pair of long arms. Drawing a deep breath, I braced myself up for the struggle with my unknown assailant.

More than once I gave myself up for lost, for my opponent was evidently a powerful man, and seemed bent on strangling me. But, fiercely though he struggled at first, I soon saw that his strength was only the frenzy of nervous desperation and that it was fast leaving him. By degrees I began to gain the upper hand, and at last, with a supreme effort, I threw him on his back and, before he could recover himself, I had my knee upon his chest and drew a long breath of relief.

I spoke to him, shouted, threatened, commanded; but he took no notice. Then I peered down close into his upturned face and fierce eyes, and the truth flashed upon me at once. I had been struggling with a madman, a hopeless, raving lunatic, and it was probably he who had made the attack upon us in the carriage.

My first impulse was one of deep gratitude for my escape; then I began to wonder what on earth I was to do with him. He was lying like a log now, perfectly quiet; but I knew that I had only to relax my hold upon him and the struggle would begin again—perhaps terminate differently. I could not take him into the house, for there was no room from which he could not easily escape. The only place seemed to me to be the coach-house. It was dry and clean, with no windows, save at the top, and with a good strong padlock. The coach-house would do, I decided, if only I could get him there.

I drew my handkerchief from my pocket, and, knotting it with my teeth, secured his hands as well as I could. Then, seizing him by the collar, I half dragged, half helped him up the garden path till we reached the coach-house, and, opening the door with one hand, I thrust him in. He made no resistance; in fact, he seemed utterly cowed; and a pitiable object he looked, crouched on the floor, with his face turned to the wall. I struck a match to obtain a better view of him.

His only attire was a grey flannel shirt and a pair of dark trousers, both of which were torn in places and saturated with rain. Of his face I could see little, for it was half hidden by the hair, matted with dirt and rain, and by his bushy whiskers and beard, ragged and unkempt. His feet were bare and black with a thick coating of mud; hence his soft, stealthy tread. Altogether, he was a gruesome object, as he lay a huddled heap against the wall, muttering to himself some unintelligible jargon.

Loosing his hands, I left him there, and, softly entering the house, found some food and rugs and

took them out to him. He eyed the former ravenously, and before I could set it down he snatched a piece of bread from my hands and began eagerly to devour it. I put the remainder down by his side and, throwing the rugs over him, stole away.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MONASTERY AMONG THE HILLS.

When I awoke in the morning the sun was already high in the heavens and it was considerably past my usual hour of rising. I jumped out of bed at once and began my toilet. I had scarcely finished my bath when there came a loud tap at the door.

"Hallo!" I cried out. "Anything the matter?"

"Yes, sir. Please, sir, John wants to know whether you locked anything up in the coach-house last night. There was——"

"Yes, I did," I interrupted quickly. "Tell him not to go there till I come down."

"Please, sir, it's too late," the girl answered, in a frightened tone. "It's got away, whatever it is."

I dropped the towel with which I had been rubbing myself and hurried on my clothes. In a few minutes I was down in the yard, where several men were standing together talking. John left them at once and came to me.

"Why did you want to go to the coach-house so early?" I exclaimed, glancing at the wide-open door and empty interior. "I had an awful job to get that man in there last night, and now you've let him go."

"Well, sir, it was a fearful row he was a-making,"

explained John. "Soon as I came this morning, about five o'clock, I was passing through the stack-yard when I heard an awful thumping at the coach-house door from the inside. Of course, I knew nowt about there being anyone theer, so I just goes straight up and opens the door, to see what was the matter, like, and, lor, I did 'ave a skeer, and no mistake! It wur quite dark, and I could see nowt but a pair o' heyes a-glaring at me as savage as a wild animal's. 'Coom out o' this 'ere and let's ha' a look at yer,' I says, for, d'ye see, I thought as it wur someone who had crept in unbeknown in the daytime and got locked in by mistake. There warn't no answer, and I wur just about to strike a match and 'ave a look at 'im, when he springs at me like a wild cat. I tried to hold him and I'm darned if he didn't nearly make his teeth meet through my hand."

He touched his right hand lightly, and I noticed for the first time that it was bandaged up.

"He got away from you, then?" I remarked.

"Got away from me?" John repeated, in a tone of utter disgust. "He warn't such a sweet-looking object, or sweet-tempered 'un either, that I wur over-anxious for the pleasure of his company, he warn't! I just got my hand out of his jaws and let him go as fast as he liked, with a jolly good kick behind to help him on, too. You see, sir, I didn't know as you'd anything to do with putting him in there," the man added apologetically. "I thought he'd got in quite promiscuous-like."

To tell the truth, although I had been alarmed at first, I did not particularly regret what had happened. At any rate, it saved me the bother of going over to the police-station at Mellborough. Still, the thought that he might even now be lurking about in the vicinity, with plenty of oppor-

tunities to provide a weapon for himself, was not altogether a pleasant one.

"Who might he have been, sir?" John inquired curiously.

"Just what I should like to know," I answered. "He's a lunatic and a dangerous one, that's certain—escaped from some asylum, I should think." And I told him of my adventure on the previous night, to which the whole group listened open-mouthed.

"I'm thinking, sir," John remarked, when I had finished, "that it'd be as well for Foulds and I to have a scour round and see if we can't find him, or he'll be doing someone a mischief."

"If you are not very busy I wish you would," I said. "I don't feel quite easy at the thought of his wandering about round here. If you do find him, lock him up and send word to the police-station at Mellborough."

After breakfast that morning my mother made a request which startled me almost as much as it delighted me.

"I am going to walk over to the monastery, Philip," she said quietly. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course I will, mother," I answered promptly. "Nothing could give me greater pleasure. When will you start?"

"I shall be ready in half an hour," she said, with a faint smile, as though she were pleased at my ready acquiescence. Then she left the room to get ready.

In about the time she had mentioned she came into the garden to me and we started on our walk. It was a very uneventful one, but I don't think that I shall ever forget it. My mother seemed, after her brief relapse into comparative kindness, to have become more inaccessible than ever; and

she walked along by my side, with downcast eyes and a nervous, thoughtful expression on her pale face.

I, too, felt somewhat depressed at starting, but soon the fresh, pure air, becoming stronger and stronger as we left the road and followed the footpath by Beacon Hill, had its invariable effect upon my spirits. All perplexing thoughts and forebodings of trouble passed away from me like magic, and my heart beat and the blood flowed through my veins with all the impetuous ardour of sanguine youth.

At the top of the hill we paused, I to look round upon my favourite scene, my mother to rest for a moment. Then we saw how great had been the storm of the night before.

Here and there were the bare trunks of trees and many a cattle-shed and barn stood roofless. The storm seemed to have worked havoc everywhere, save where, on the summit of its wooded hill, Ravenor Castle, with its great range of mighty battlements, its vast towers, and grey walls of invincible thickness, frowned down upon the country at its feet. Looking across at it, it seemed to me that the place had never seemed so imposing as then.

My mother stood by my side and noticed my intent gaze.

"You admire Ravenor Castle very much, Philip?" she said quietly.

I withdrew my eyes with an effort.

"I do, mother," I confessed; "very much indeed. The place has a sort of fascination for me—and the man who lives there!"

My mother had turned a little away from me and stood with face upturned to heaven and mutely moving lips. Out of her eyes I could see the tears slowly welling, and her tall slim figure

was convulsed with sobs. I sprang to her side and caught hold of her hand.

"What is it, mother?" I cried. "Tell me!"

She shook her head sadly.

"Not now, Philip—not now. Come, let us go!"

Side by side we began to descend the hill. Our path wound around several freshly-planted spinneys and then led through a plantation of pine-trees.

Then we turned with regret, so far as I was concerned, into the muddy road again and walked for more than a mile between high, straight hedges. At last, soon after mid-day, we turned to the left, passed through a farmyard and along a winding path, which led us, now by the side of turnip fields, now across bracken-covered open country, to the summit of our last hill.

Here again we paused. Below us, close up against the background of the colourless hills, drearily situated in the bleakest spot of the austere landscape, the straight spires and severely simple buildings of the monastery were clustered together. A little above it, on an artificial eminence of rock, a rude cross stood out in vivid relief against the sky, and on this my mother's eyes were fixed with a sort of rapt wistfulness, as we stood side by side on the top of the hill looking downwards.

It was a fitting spot that these men—who counted it among their virtues that in their rigid self-immolation they had cut themselves off even from the beauties of Nature—had chosen for their habitation. But although the place had a peculiar impressiveness of its own, which never failed to exercise a sort of fascination upon me, I was glad to-day when my mother moved forward again.

As we neared the end of our journey and turned in at the long, straight avenue which led to the monastery doors, the strange agitation which I had noticed in my mother's manner during the earlier

part of the day visibly increased. The cold inexpressiveness which had dwelt for so long in her face vanished, and into it there crept a look which, having once seen, I cared not to look upon again. It seemed as though she were endeavouring to brace herself up for some tremendous ordeal, and I would have given anything to have been able to put into words the sympathy which had risen up strongly within me.

Unnatural, cold, severe and, at the best of times, indifferent, as she had lately been to me, she was still my mother and I loved her. But I dared not break in with words upon the fierce anguish which was already beginning to leave its marks upon her white, strained face. Only when we stood before the bare stone front of the monastery, and with feeble fingers she had pulled the great iron bell, could I speak at all, and then the words were not such as I wished to speak. Afterwards, when I thought of them—and I often did think of them and of every trifling incident of that memorable walk—they seemed to me weak and ill-chosen.

But, such as they were, I am glad that I spoke them.

She listened as one whose thoughts were far away, but when I ceased, breathless, she laid her hand upon my arm and, with her dim, sad eyes looking into mine, said simply:

"This is for your sake, Philip—for your sake!"

Then, before I could ask her what she meant, the great door slowly opened and the guest-master stood before us. She passed him with a silent salutation and vanished on her way to the chapel; and, though I watched her longingly, I dared not follow. Then, declining Father Bernard's invitation to go to his room and rest, I turned away from the door and wandered into the grounds.

Hour after hour of the brief winter's day passed

away. Father Bernard came out in search of me and offered me refreshments ; but I shook my head. I could not eat, nor drink, nor rest. A strange but powerful apprehension of some coming crisis in my life—some great evil connected with my mother's visit to this place—had laid hold of me, and all my struggles against it were impotent.

It was late in the afternoon before she came. I had climbed up to the top of "Calvary" and, with sick heart and longing eyes, was watching the door from which she must issue. Suddenly it was opened and she stood for a moment upon the threshold looking around for me. To my dying day I shall think of her as I saw her then.

Her face was the face of a saint—calm, passionless, and happy, with a gentle, chastened happiness. I knew, when I looked upon her, that she had left the burden of her great sorrow behind. But she had paid a price for it. Pale and fragile as she had always appeared, she seemed now to have been wasted by some fierce, scathing ordeal, which had driven out of her features everything human and left only a spiritual life. As she moved slowly forward into the drive and I saw her even more distinctly, she seemed to me to have gained a strange, new beauty ; but it was a beauty which made me look upon her with a sudden shuddering fear.

I hurried down to her side and she welcomed me with a smile such as I had seldom seen on her face, and which was altogether in harmony with her softened expression. Then she took my arm and we turned towards home.

"You are happier now, mother?" I ventured to ask her, and she answered me by silently pressing my arm.

We passed down the avenue, thickly strewn with decaying leaves, along the winding lane, and

through the gate which led up to Ive's Head Hill. Once or twice as we were making the ascent I fancied that she hung heavily upon my arm and I asked if she were tired; but she only shook her head. We had reached the summit before the terrible fear which had been gnawing at my heart took definite shape. Then, for the first time since we had started upon our return journey, I was able to look into her face, which she had been keeping averted from me, and when I saw the ghastly change which had crept into it, my heart stood still and all my senses seemed numbed with fear.

"Mother," I cried, "you are ill! What is the matter? Oh, speak to me—do!"

She had fallen into my arms, and her hands, which touched mine as they fell to her side, were as cold as ice. Her face was like the face of one who has already triumphed over the shadows of death. Far away at our feet the Cross of Calvary was standing out with rugged vividness against the fast darkening sky and upon it her closing eyes were steadily fixed. Her lips were slightly parted in a happy, confident smile, and her whole being seemed absorbed in the most religious devotion. Once she whispered my name and faintly pressed my hand; then her lips moved again and I heard the dread sound of the solemn prayer, faltered out in a broken whisper, "*In manus Tuas, Domine!*"

In my heart I knew that she was dying, and that human help would be of no avail. Yet I was loth to abandon all hope, and setting her gently down I looked anxiously around. On the summit of the next range of hills a man was sitting on horseback, looking down upon the monastery—a motionless figure against the sky. I cried out to him, and at the sound of my voice he started

round and looked towards us; then, suddenly digging the spurs deep into the sides of his great black horse, he came thundering up the side of the hill at a pace which made the ground shake beneath my feet like the tremblings of an earthquake.

"What is wrong?" he cried hoarsely; and, looking into his face, I recognised Mr. Ravenor.

I pointed to my mother's prostrate figure, and, gazing at him with dry eyes, I answered mechanically:

"She is dying!"

The words had scarcely left my lips before he had leaped from his horse, and, passing his arm around her, bent over her pallid face.

"Oh, this is horrible!" he murmured. "You must not die—you must not die! I have——"

His voice seemed choked with emotion and he did not finish his sentence. She spoke to him, but so softly that I could not hear the words.

I walked a few yards away and once more looked wildly round. Far away on the dark hillside I could see the white-robed figures of the lay brethren bending over their labour. Nearer there was no one. The road below was deserted and a deep stillness seemed brooding over the bare, shadowy landscape. Sick at heart I turned back and fell on my knees by my mother's side.

We remained there, fearing almost to look into her face, until the twilight deepened upon the hills and slowly blotted out from our view even the dark cross standing up against the grey sky. Then Mr. Ravenor leaned for a moment forward and a low groan escaped from his lips. It told me what I dreaded—that my mother was dead!

CHAPTER XXI.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

THE paroxysm of my grief passed slowly away, and I rose to my feet and looked around with streaming eyes. Mr. Ravenor was still by my side, and together we carried my mother back to the monastery. The news of our approach had preceded us, and long before we reached our journey's end the solemn minute-bell was tolling out to the silent night, awakening strange echoes in the hills and finding a reverberation of its mournfulness in my heart.

Austere and impressive as the great bare front of the monastery had always appeared to me, it had never seemed so cold and desolate as when our melancholy little procession wound round the Hill of Calvary and slowly approached the entrance. The gloom of a winter's evening was hanging around the building, which, with never a ray of light from any part, looked like a habitation of the dead —a gigantic vault.

But suddenly, as we drew near, the front door was slowly opened and the dark figure of a monk, holding above his head a lighted taper, stood on the steps and in a low monotone repeated a Latin prayer. When he ceased there was a moment's silence, and then from the chapel there came the sound of deep voices chanting slowly in solemn unison the *Miserere*

The remainder of that night seems like a dream to me now, of which I can recall but little. But I remember that, long past midnight, when I had thrown myself down upon the stone floor of the guest-chamber, I heard soft steps and the rustle of garments approaching me, and, looking up, I saw the sweetest face I ever beheld in man or woman looking down into mine from the deep folds of a monk's cowl.

He stayed with me for a while, speaking welcome words of comfort; then, gathering his robes about him, he stood up, prepared to leave. But first he handed me a small packet.

"This was left in my charge for you, Philip Morton," he said. "Little did I dream that so soon I should be called upon to fulfil my trust. Take it, my son."

The packet, which I opened with reverent fingers, was a very small one, and consisted of a single letter only. That I might see the more clearly to read it, I pushed open the narrow, diamond-framed window, and the moonlight filled the little room with a soft, mellowed light. Then I read:

"The Barnwood Monastery of St. Clement's,
"*November* 19*th*, 18—.

"My dearest Son,—I write these lines to you, Philip, feeling happier than I have done for many years, because I have a deep and sure conviction that my life is drawing fast to a close, and that the end may come at any minute. Alas! my son, I feel that I have not been to you all that a mother should be. It may be that my coldness has alienated from me the love which I know you have been willing to give. It may be so; but I choose rather to believe that you will pity me when I tell you that the coldness which has grown up

between us was none of my choosing, but was only part of a terrible punishment which I have had to bear for many weary years.

"What my sin—or let me be merciful to myself and call it my error—was, I do not purpose here to tell you. Some day the person at whose discretion I have left it may deem it well to tell you the whole story. For my sake, Philip, for the sake of the love which I know you bear me—and which, God knows, I have for you—I beg you to wait until that time comes and not seek to hasten it.

"Think of me as kindly as you can, dear. If the path which I chose to follow was not the wisest, I have, at least, suffered terribly for it. For many weary years grief and horror and remorse have been making my life one long purgatory. Yes, I have suffered indeed. But at last I have found peace.

"Do not marvel at what I am going to tell you, Philip. My will—the little I have to leave is yours—is drawn up and signed and I have appointed Mr. Ravenor your guardian. There are reasons for this which you cannot know, but he will be only too glad to accept the charge; and in all things, Philip, even if he should desire you altogether to change your position in life, follow his command and submit to his wishes.

"Farewell, my beloved son—farewell! God grant that your life may be good and happy, and that your last days may be as peaceful as mine. I can wish you nothing better. Once more, farewell!—Your affectionate

"MOTHER."

CHAPTER XXII.

FOR LIFE.

My mother's death marked an epoch in my life, for immediately afterwards a great change came over my circumstances and position. Of the dreary days just before and after the funeral I shall here say but little. Their sadness is for me and me alone.

Until after the ceremony I remained at the monastery, seeking relief from my thoughts by rambles over the hills, by watches at dead of night before the spot where, with many candles burning round her open coffin, my mother lay, and by long conversations with Father Alexander, my comforter. When the time of the funeral came, Mr. Ravenor stood by my side, the only other mourner, and I knew that the banks of choice white flowers, which smothered the coffin and perfumed the winter air, were his gift.

After it was all over he came to me where I stood, a little apart, and put his hand upon my shoulder.

"Philip, my boy," he said kindly, "will you come back to the Castle with me? I am your guardian now, you know."

I drew a long breath.

"Let me go back to the farm for a week by

myself," I said; "then I will come to you. Be ready to go to Dr. Randall's."

"Let it be so, then," he answered. "Perhaps it is best."

I said good-bye to the monks, especially to Father Alexander, with regret, for they had all been very good to me. Then I accompanied Mr. Ravenor to his carriage and was driven swiftly homewards.

The week that followed I spent in solitude, and as the days passed by the bitterness of my grief left me. Not that the memory of my mother grew less dear—rather the reverse; but I began to recognise that what had happened was best. Better that she should have died thus, full of thoughts of holy things and with a conscience at rest, than that she should still be bearing with aching heart a burden which she had never deserved.

On the last day of the week I was told that a visitor had arrived and wished to see me, and before I could ask his name he had entered the room. It was Mr. Marx.

The man was surely an admirable actor. Instinct told me that he cared not a jot for either my mother or me; but his few words of sympathy were excellently chosen and gracefully spoken. Then he at once changed the subject and talked pleasantly of other things; and as he went on I suddenly remembered that I had not seen him since the night of our drive home from Torchester, and that, therefore, he could know nothing of the adventure which had befallen me after his departure. I took advantage, therefore, of a pause in the conversation to tell him all about it; and, impassive though his face was, I could see that it made a great impression.

"Do you remember what the man was like?"

he asked, knitting his brows. "Can you describe him?"

I did so as well as I could and in the midst of my narration, making some trivial excuse, he moved his chair out of the light into the shadows of the room. But if he wished to escape my scrutiny he was a little too late, for I had already noticed his blanched face and trembling hands. Evidently there was something more in this midnight attack than I had thought. Who was the lunatic? I wondered. I felt sure, looking at him closely, that Mr. Marx knew. No need now for Mr. Ravenor to warn me against the companionship of this man. Already my passive dislike had grown into an active aversion.

Instinctively I felt that he was both unscrupulous and untrustworthy. I felt that he was seeking me for ends of his own, and all the time I was half afraid of him.

Doubtless my manner showed that he was no welcome visitor, but still he lingered. At last my housekeeper brought me in my afternoon cup of tea and I was compelled to ask him to join me. He did so, drank it thoughtfully, and immediately afterwards rose to go.

"I have been wondering what can have become of this poor lunatic," he said carelessly. "Scarcely a pleasant person to meet on a dark evening."

I shrugged my shoulders as I walked out into the hall with him.

"It is nearly a fortnight ago," I remarked; "he can hardly have remained in the neighbourhood and in hiding all this time."

"Still, if he had been captured we should have heard of it," Mr. Marx objected.

"Probably. And yet I don't see why. I should not, at any rate, as I have been away at the monastery; and you, I don't know how you

would have heard of it, unless you read the local papers."

"A weakness of which I am not guilty," he answered drily. "Nor have I been outside the grounds. We have been hard at work."

"Did you walk here?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"I came down in a trap from the Castle, but the man was going to Mellborough and I told him not to wait for me. You won't walk across the park with me, I suppose, just to get an appetite for dinner? It's a splendid evening."

I looked at him furtively, but closely. Yes, Mr. Marx was a coward, in addition to his other slight demerits.

"No, thanks," I answered shortly. "I've had a long walk already to-day. Good evening!"

I turned back into the sitting-room, but before I had reached my easy-chair I began to think that I was scarcely behaving well. After all, Mr. Marx was a middle-aged man, and it was possible that his strength might have been sapped by the brain labour in which he was constantly engaged and his sedentary life.

Supposing he were to encounter this lunatic and suffer at his hands, perhaps even lose his life, should I not blame myself? I came to a speedy decision. I would let him have his fright, but I would follow him at a little distance and see that he came to no harm.

I took a short, heavy stick from the rack and, crossing the stackyard, vaulted over the palings into the park, purposely avoiding the gate. About a hundred yards in front Mr. Marx was walking quickly along, with both hands in his ulster pockets, and looking frequently around him. Men had

been busy in the park on the previous day cutting the bracken, and along the side of the road were many stacks of it waiting to be carted away. I noticed that whenever Mr. Marx drew near one of these he gave it a wide berth and I smiled to myself at this evidence of his anxiety.

I was walking on the turf, that he might not hear my footsteps, and was able to keep him easily in sight, for it was a clear, frosty evening, and the full moon was shining in a cloudless sky. At a sudden bend in the road he came in sight of a place where stacks of bracken had been left on either side opposite to each other. I saw him pause as though hesitating which he should avoid, and at the same moment I distinctly saw some dark body crouched down behind one of them and swaying slightly backwards and forwards.

I broke at once into a run, but before the echoes of my warning shout had died away a figure sprang like a wild cat at Mr. Marx's throat. There was a flash and a sharp report, but from the direction of the former I could see that the revolver had been knocked up into the air and exploded harmlessly.

When at last I reached the assailant and his victim it was a fearful sight I looked upon. The face of the lunatic was ghastly and his wild eyes almost started from their sockets in his rage.

White and emaciated as a skeleton's, his face was still capable of expression—and such an expression. A frenzied desire to kill seemed to be his sole aim, and his long, skinny fingers clutched Mr. Marx's throat as in a vice. The latter's eyeballs were protruding from his head and his breath was coming in short, agonised pants; yet all the while Mr. Marx was holding the madman in such a

fierce grip that I could hear his ribs snapping like whalebone.

My arrival saved Mr. Marx from a speedy death by strangulation. Though I lifted the lunatic up in my arms and strained every muscle to pull him away, his fingers never relaxed till I stopped his breath and rendered him momentarily unconscious.

I waited for Mr. Marx to come to himself, my foot resting lightly upon the prostrate body of his assailant. Soon he rose slowly to his feet and began groping about in the road.

"What do you want?" I asked. "Lost anything?"

"My revolver."

I pointed to where it lay gleaming in the moonlight. He picked it up and set it to an undischarged barrel. I watched him curiously.

"You won't want that again," I remarked. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I am going to put that beast out of his misery," he answered. "Stand out of the way!"

"Nonsense! You will do nothing of the sort!" I cried hotly. "What! kill an insensible man? He has as much right to live as you. You shall not commit murder in my presence; and, least of all, shall you kill a poor insane creature like this. Put that thing up!"

An awful look flashed into his face, and, as he suddenly raised his arm, I looked into the dark muzzle of his revolver.

With a quick spring I wrenched the revolver from his hand, and, bending backwards, threw it far away into the bracken.

"I don't know what you were going to do, Mr. Marx," I said, looking at him steadily, "but it

seems to me that you are not a fit person to be trusted with firearms."

He stood still, speechless with rage. I turned my back upon him and found, to my surprise, that the man whose life Mr. Marx had so much desired was lying on his side, looking at me with wide-open eyes.

"Well, have your own way," Mr. Marx said, quietly; "I dare say you are right. There was no need to be violent, or to throw away my favourite revolver. What do you propose to do with him?"

Mr. Marx advanced, but at the sight of him the lunatic, who was leaning heavily upon my arm, and groaning with pain, shrank down upon the ground, cowering at my feet like a dog. He covered his face with his hands and broke into one of the most pitiful cries of distress that I have ever heard from human lips. I motioned Mr. Marx back.

"I can manage him alone, I think; and the sight of you upsets him. Will you follow us down?"

Mr. Marx advanced a step or two, his eyes flashing with anger. Then suddenly he turned his back upon us, and, without a word, walked rapidly away. I raised my prisoner, and half carried, half dragged him back to the farm.

In a few hours the doctor from Rothland had arrived and speedily set the broken bones. He seemed much interested in the case and made a careful examination.

"Do you think he has been a lunatic long?" I asked.

The doctor shook his head.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I should say his madness has come on quite recently—the effect of some severe shock probably. If he

is treated properly there is no doubt that he will regain his reason."

In a few days the lunatic was pronounced well enough in health to be moved; and as all inquiries and advertisements about him proved fruitless, he was consigned to the county asylum at Torchester.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MY GUARDIAN.

On the third day after my adventure in the park Mr. Ravenor called to see me. He came in splashed from head to foot and had evidently ridden a long distance and fast. I offered him a chair and some refreshment, for he looked pale and tired, but he declined both, and walked slowly up and down the room, his hands grasping a long riding-whip behind his back.

"I can only give you a minute or two now, Morton," he said, with some slight return of his former brusque *hauteur;* "I am expecting visitors from London to-night and must get back to receive them. But there is something I must say to you. You will be surprised to hear that your mother has left you a considerable property?"

I was very much surprised.

"Are you quite sure of this, Mr. Ravenor?" I ventured to ask. "My mother always spoke to me as though we were poor."

"I do not make mistakes," he answered, pausing in his walk and looking down upon me from his great height with knitted brows and piercing eyes, "least of all in matters of such importance. How much the exact sum will amount to I cannot tell yet, but it is more than twenty thousand pounds, so you will be able to choose your own profession.

What will it be, I wonder—the Bar, the Army, the Church, agriculture? Come, you are a boy of imagination and have never been in love. You must have had day-dreams of some sort. Whither have they led you?"

"Not to any of the professions which you have mentioned," I answered promptly.

"Then where? Tell me. I am curious to know."

"My ideas have always been very vague," I said slowly. "I should like to live quite away from any town, to read a good deal, and to spend the rest of my time out of doors; and then, perhaps, after a time, I might try to think something out and put it into words."

"In short, you would like to be an author," Mr. Ravenor broke in, with a slight smile.

"Yes; but I should not want to write to amuse people, or to become famous," I went on, encouraged by Mr. Ravenor's gravity. "I should like to make people think. I should like to make them turn aside from the groove of their daily life and realise that the world is full of greater and higher things than mere material prosperity. Men seem to me to find their daily work and pleasure too absorbing. They think of themselves and others only as individuals, never as limbs of a great common humanity with a mighty destiny. The world grows narrower and narrower for them as they grow older, instead of broader and broader. It is because they neglect the use of their imagination—at least, so it seems to me."

"Have you read Hibbet's little pamphlets?" Mr. Ravenor asked.

"Both of them," I answered. "I like his ideas."

"Have your clothes come from Torchester?" he inquired, with apparent irrelevance.

"Yes; they came last week," I told him, wondering.

"Very well; put on your dress-suit and come up to the Castle at eight o'clock to-night. You shall dine with me and meet Hibbet."

Meet Sir Richard Hibbet! Dine at the same table! My cheeks flushed and my heart beat fast. Life was opening out for me.

"Yes; he and Marris and Williams, the publisher, you know, are all staying at the Castle. There will be some more of them down to-night. Don't be late. I will find time, if I can, to have some talk with you, for I want you to go to Dr. Randall's next week."

He nodded and took his departure. I watched him mount his horse and gallop away across the open park. Then I started for a solitary walk, to ponder my altered prospects.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MY FIRST DINNER PARTY.

At a quarter to eight I stood in the great hall of Ravenor Castle. On my first visit its vastness and gloom had somewhat chilled me; now it was altogether different. A small army of servants in picturesque livery and with powdered hair were moving noiselessly about. Soft lights were burning on many brackets, dispelling the deep shades which had hung somewhat drearily about; and there was a fragrant perfume of flowers and a pleasant sense of warmth in the air. I began to understand at once the stories I had heard of the luxury and magnificence with which Mr. Ravenor entertained his guests on the rare occasions when he threw open his doors.

Mr. Ravenor was in his private rooms, I was told, and his own groom of the chambers, who had been summoned to take my name, ushered me, after a moment's hesitation, into the library. I walked to the fire, for I was cold, probably through being unused to wearing such thin clothes; and, standing there with my hands behind my back, looked around with a feeling almost of awe at the vast collection of books with which I was surrounded.

"And who are you, please?"

I started and looked in the direction from which the voice—a sweet, childish treble—came. Seated demurely in the centre of a large armchair, with tumbled hair, and a book upon her lap, was a very young lady. Her clear blue eyes were fixed calmly but inquiringly upon me, as though expecting an immediate answer, and there was a slight frown upon her forehead. Altogether, for such a diminutive maiden, she appeared rather formidable.

"I didn't know that you were there," I said, in explanation of my start. "My name is Morton —Philip Morton."

She looked me over gravely and critically, and succeeded in making me feel uncomfortable. Apparently, however, the examination ended in my favour, for the frown disappeared and she closed her book.

"Philip is pretty," she said condescendingly. "I don't think much of Morton. I rather like Philip, though."

"I—I'm glad of that," I answered lamely. It was very ridiculous, but I could think of nothing else to say. I wanted to say something brilliant, but it wouldn't come; so I stood still and looked at her and got rather red in the face.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked.

"Haven't the least idea," I admitted.

She leaned her small, delicate head upon her hand and began swaying her feet slowly backwards and forwards.

"I am Lady Beatrice Cecilia—my mother is Lady Silchester," she said. "Do you think it is a pretty name?"

"Very," I answered, biting my lip; "much prettier than mine."

"Do you know, I think you are a nice boy!" she proceeded. "I rather like you."

"I'm so glad!" I answered, feeling unreasonably

delighted. "I'm sure that I like you," I added fervently.

"It's very good of you to say so, when you've only just seen me," she remarked; "but you can't be quite sure. You don't know anything about me, you see. I might be dreadfully disagreeable."

"But I'm sure you're not," I answered, feeling that I was getting on.

She was good enough to seem pleased at my confidence; but she made no further remark for a minute or two, during which I racked my brains in vain for some effective remark, with my eyes fixed upon her. She certainly made a very charming picture, curled up in the great black oak chair, with the firelight playing upon her ruddy golden hair and glistening in her bright eyes.

"You've been reading, haven't you?" I asked, pointing to the book which lay in her lap.

"It's not a nice book at all!" she said decidedly. "I don't like any of the books here. Oh!"

I turned round quickly, for I saw that she was looking behind me. Standing on the threshold of his inner room was the tall, dark figure of Mr. Ravenor, handsomer than ever, it seemed to me, in his plain evening dress.

Slowly he advanced out of the shadows, with a faint smile upon his pale face, and laid his hand upon her shoulder, looking first at my little hostess and then at me.

"So you've been entertaining one of my guests for me, Trixie, have you?" he said. "Rather late for you to be up, isn't it? Your nurse has been looking for you everywhere."

"Then I suppose I must go," Lady Beatrice Cecilia remarked deliberately. She rose, shook her hair out, and, replacing the book which she had been reading upon the shelf prepared to depart. But

first she came up to where I was standing on the hearthrug and held out her little white hand.

"Good-night, Philip Morton," she said, looking up at me with a grave smile. "I am very glad that you came in here to talk to me. I was so dull."

I made some reciprocative speech, which, if it was somewhat awkwardly expressed, had at least the merit of earnestness, and my eyes followed her admiringly as she walked to the door and disappeared with a backward glance and a smile. Then I started and coloured, to find that Mr. Ravenor was watching me.

"I don't know why they should have brought you here," he said. "Come this way."

I followed Mr. Ravenor across the hall into a suite of rooms hung with satin, opening out one from another, and seeming to my inexperience like a succession of brilliantly-lit fairy chambers. In the smallest and most remote room three men were standing talking together, and in a low chair by their side reclined Lady Silchester, holding a dainty screen of peacock feathers between her face and the fire, and listening to the conversation with a slightly bored air. She was in full evening toilette, and several rows of diamonds flashed and sparkled with every rise and fall of her snow-white throat. Afterwards I grew to look upon Lady Silchester as a good type of the well-bred society woman; but then she was a revelation to me—the revelation of a new species.

My appearance seemed at first to surprise and then slightly to discompose her, but both emotions passed away at once and she welcomed me with a charming little smile as she languidly raised her hand and placed it within mine for a moment.

At our entrance the conversation ceased for a

moment. Mr. Ravenor laid his hand upon my shoulder and turned towards the little group.

"Sir Richard, let me introduce to you a young ward of mine and a disciple of yours. Sir Richard Hibbet — Mr. Morton; Professor Marris — Mr. Morton; Mr. Later—Mr. Morton."

They all shook hands with me, and, widening their circle a little, continued the conversation.

This was interrupted presently by the announcement of dinner, the Professor taking in our hostess, the others following, Mr. Ravenor and I bringing up the rear.

There was no lack of conversation during dinner, though gradually it turned towards purely literary matters and remained there. To me it was altogether fascinating, although it was often beyond my comprehension.

Long after Lady Silchester had departed we sat round the small table glittering with plate and finely-cut glass, and loaded with choice flowers and wonderful fruits; and my senses were almost dazed by the brilliancy of my material surroundings, and the ever-flowing conversation, which seemed always to be teaching me something new and opening up fresh fields of thought. At times I scarcely knew which most to admire—the dry, pungent wit and caustic remarks of the Professor; the perfectly expressed, classical English of Mr. Later; the sound, good sense of Sir Richard, seasoned with an apparently inexhaustible stock of anecdotes and quotations culled from all imaginable sources; or the brilliant epigrams, the trenchant criticisms, and the occasional flashes of genuine eloquence by means of which Mr. Ravenor, with rare art, continually stimulated the talk.

Almost unnoticed, Mr. Marx, still in his morning coat, with pale face and dark rims under his eyes, had entered and sank wearily into a seat; but,

although he listened with apparent interest, he took no part in the war of words which was flashing around him. Suddenly it all came to an end. Mr. Ravenor glanced at his watch and rose.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I must ask you to excuse me for an hour. If you care to see the library, Mr. Marx will show it you, or the smoking-room and billiard-room are at your service. Or if you care to remain here there is plenty more of the yellow-seal claret and the cigars are upon the table. Philip, I want you."

I rose and followed him towards the door. As I did so I had to pass Mr. Marx, who had left his seat on some pretext. He leaned over towards me, haggard and pale, and pushed a slip of paper into my fingers.

"Read it at once," he muttered, in a quick, low tone. Then he moved up and took Mr. Ravenor's place at the head of the table.

I felt inclined to throw it back to him; but I did not. Passing across the hall, I unfolded it and read these few words, scrawled in a large, shaking hand:

"You must not go to Dr. Randall's. Mr. Ravenor will give you a choice. Go anywhere but there. If you neglect this warning you will repent it all your life. I swear it. Tear this up."

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. MARX'S WARNING.

My first impulse, on glancing through Mr. Marx's brief note, was to show it to Mr. Ravenor; but, after a second's consideration, I changed my mind. Mr. Marx was a complete mystery to me. At times it seemed possible that the interest which he undoubtedly showed in me was genuine and kindly, and I struggled against my dislike of the man. Then I remembered his brutal conduct to the lunatic and the other inexplicable parts of his behaviour, and the darkest suspicions and doubts began to take shape in my imagination.

There was something altogether mysterious about him—his connection with Mr. Ravenor and his manner towards myself. I was puzzled and more than half inclined to decide against the man whom personally I had grown to detest. But, on the other hand, I was young and still an optimist with regard to my fellow-men.

What harm had I done Mr. Marx, and why should he seek to injure me? It seemed improbable, almost ridiculous. So in the end a certain sense of fairness induced me to respect his postscript, and I said nothing to Mr. Ravenor about his secretary's warning.

My interview with him was a very short one indeed. He led the way into the study in which

I had first seen him and, closing the door, turned round and faced me upon the hearthrug. The room was dimly lit, but where he stood the fast-dying fire cast a faint glow around his tall, straight figure, and showed me a face cold and resolute as marble, but not unkind.

"Philip Morton," he said slowly, "it has occurred to me that in wishing you to go to Lincolnshire, I may have been influenced to a certain extent by selfish considerations. If you have the slightest preference for a public school——"

I knew instinctively whence that idea had come and I interrupted him.

"Nothing should induce me to go anywhere else but to Dr. Randall's!" I exclaimed firmly.

"In that case," he continued, "I wish you to leave to-morrow. You will be ready?"

I assented at once.

"I, too, am leaving here—it may be for a very long while," he went on. "In two months' time I hope to start for Persia, and between now and then my movements will be uncertain. I cannot settle down here. It is useless."

A great weariness shone out of his dark blue eyes and he stifled a sigh. Some thought or memory coloured with regret had flashed across his mind; but what it was I could not tell.

"You remember your mother's letter to you and her dying request?" he continued, in a changed tone. "I cannot explain it now, although I must remind you of it. This packet"—and he passed me a large, sealed envelope—"contains a cheque-book, the address of the lawyer who will manage your affairs, and a letter which you will not open unless you have certain news and proof of my death. You will find that you are, comparatively speaking, rich. How this comes about I cannot tell you now, and you must remember your mother's

dying injunction not to seek to find out until the time comes, when you will know everything. At present, I can only assure you that the money is yours by right, that it is not a gift, and that no one else has any claim to it. That is all I can say upon the subject. Are you satisfied ? "

Curiosity seemed a mean thing to me as I listened to my guardian's words and looked into his sad, stern face. All the old fascination which I had felt from the first in his presence was strong upon me that night. Whatever he had bidden me to do I should have done it. And so I answered :

" I am satisfied. What you tell me is mine I will take and ask no questions."

" That is well," he said quietly. " And now, one word about your future, Philip, for to-morrow you will take up some of the responsibilities of early manhood. A great man once said that the best adviser of youth was the man whose own life had been a failure. If this be anything more than a paradox, then there can be no one better fitted for that post than I. Already the flavour of life has become like dead ashes between my teeth ; and the fault is my own. Mr. Marris was talking a great deal of nonsense in the drawing-room before dinner this evening. I want to say just one or two words to you on the same subject, and remember that I speak as an outsider, impersonally.

" Before I was twenty-one years old, I had studied in most of the schools of modern philosophy, and had thrown off my religion like an old rag. I was inflated with a sense of my own intellectual superiority over other men. It was philosophy which taught men to live, I declared, and philosophy which taught them to die. With that motto before me, I carefully set myself to annihilate every vestige of faith with which I had ever been endowed. I succeeded—too well. It is dead ; and sometimes

I fear that it will never reawaken. And what am I? As miserable a man as ever drew breath upon this earth. It seems to me as though I had crushed a part of my very life and the sore will rankle for ever.

"There is a part of man's nature, Philip—that is to say, of such men as I have been and you will be—the sympathetic, emotional, reverential part, which cries out for some belief in a higher, an infinite Power, for some sort of religion which it can cling to and entwine with every action of daily life. You must satisfy that craving if you desire to know happiness. For me there is no such knowledge. I have deliberately committed spiritual suicide; I have torn up faith by the roots and have made a void in my heart, which nothing else can ever fill. Frankly, I tell you, Philip, that there are times when religion of any sort seems to me no better than a fairy-tale. It need not seem so to you. Shape out for yourself any form of belief—that of the Christian is as good as any other—and resolutely cling to it. It is my advice to you—mine who believe in no God and no future state. Follow it and farewell!"

He held out his hand and clasped mine for a moment. I would have spoken, but before I could find words he had disappeared through a curtained door into his inner apartment. So I turned away and went.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LOST PHOTOGRAPH.

It was about five o'clock on as dreary an afternoon as I ever remember, when the slow train, which crawls always at a most miserable pace from Peterborough across the eastern counties, deposited me at Little Drayton. Besides the station-master there were but two people on the wet platform—one a porter, who made for my bags with almost wolflike alacrity after a moment's amazed stare at me, presumably at the rare advent of a passenger with luggage; the other was a thin, dark young man, clad in a light mackintosh with very large checks, and smoking a long cigar. Whilst I was collecting my things he came leisurely up and accosted me.

"Your name Morton?" he inquired, without removing his cigar from his teeth.

I assented.

"Have you come down to meet me?" I asked.

"Yes; old Randall's gone out to dinner, so he asked Cis and me to come and fetch you. Cart's outside; but we can't take all the luggage. Just look out what you want, will you, and we'll send for the rest to-morrow."

I selected a portmanteau and followed him out of the station. A light, four-wheeled brown cart was waiting, drawn by a pair of small,

clever-looking cobs, altogether a very smart turn-out.

"Pitch that bag in behind, porter," ordered my new acquaintance. "Now, then, Mr. Morton, if you're ready we'll be off. Your train's half an hour late, and Cis will be wondering what's become of us."

"Is Cis Mr. Ravenor's nephew, Silchester?" I asked, as I clambered up beside him.

"Oh, yes! By the bye, I ought to have introduced myself, oughtn't I? My name is De Cartienne—Leonard De Cartienne."

"And are you Dr. Randall's other pupil?" I inquired.

"Yes; I'm doing a grind there. Beastly slow it is, too. You'll be sorry you've come, I can tell you, before very long."

Looking around me, I was inclined to think that that was not improbable. It was too dark to see far, but what I could see was anything but promising. The country was perfectly flat, dreary, and barren, and the view was unbroken by tree, or hedge, or hill. By the side of the road was a small canal, over the sullen waters of which, and across the road, brooded spectral-like clouds of mist. The rain still fell rapidly, and the wheels of our cart ran noiselessly in the sandy, paste-like mud.

"Ghastly night, isn't it?" remarked my companion, breaking the silence again.

"Rather!" I assented vigorously. "What a flat, ugly country, too! I never saw anything like it."

"Beastly country! beastly place altogether!" De Cartienne agreed. "I'm jolly sick of it, I can tell you! Steady, Brandy! steady, sir!" giving the near animal a cut with the whip.

"What do you call your horses?" I asked curiously.

"Brandy and Soda. Jolly neat name for a pair. Don't you think so?"

"Uncommon, at any rate," I answered ambiguously. "Didn't you say that we were to call for Silchester somewhere?"

"Mean Cis? Oh, yes; we've got to pick him up at the Rose and Crown."

"A hotel?"

"Well, hardly. Fact is," De Cartienne continued, dropping his voice a little, and glancing behind to see whether the groom was listening—"fact is, Cis is a bit inclined to make a fool of himself. There's a pretty girl at this place and he puts in an uncommon lot of time there. Awfully pretty girl she is, really," he added confidentially. "Won't stand any nonsense, either. The place is only a pub., after all, but everyone who goes there has to behave himself. She won't have a lot of fellows dangling about after her, though she might have the whole town if she liked. Makes her all the more dangerous, I think."

"And Lord Silchester——"

"Hang the 'lord'!" interrupted my companion, whipping his horses.

"Well, Silchester, then! I suppose he admires her very much?"

"Admires her! I should think he does! He's awful spoons on her! It's quite sickening the way they go on sometimes. There's a regular stew on there to-night, though, tremendous scene."

"What about?"

"Well, it seems that Milly's father—he's the landlord of the place, you know—left home about a month ago, saying he was going up to London on some business. He was expected back in a fortnight or three weeks; but he's never turned up and he hasn't written. So at last Milly sent up to the place where he always stops in town

and also to some friends whom he was going to see. This morning a reply comes from both of them. Nothing has been seen or heard of him at all. Of course, Milly imagines the worst at once, goes off into hysterics, and, when we called this evening on our way down, was half out of her mind."

"And so Silchester stopped with her to console her?"

"Exactly," assented De Cartienne, with a queer smile. "Shouldn't wonder if he succeeded, either!"

We entered the street of an old-fashioned, straggling town, the glimmering lights of which had been in sight for some time. De Cartienne, sitting forward a little, devoted his whole attention to the horses, for the stones were wet and slippery, and Brandy seemed to shy at everything and anything which presented itself, from the little pools of water glistening in the lamplight, which lay in the hollows of the road, down to his own shadow. I looked round curiously. The old-fashioned market-place, the quaintly built houses, the dimly lit shops, and little knots of gaping rustics, whom our rapid approach scattered right and left, were, at any rate, more interesting and pleasanter to look upon than the damp, miserable country outside. Suddenly we pulled up with a jerk outside a small, but clean-looking inn, and the groom leaped down from behind and made his way to the horses' heads.

"Take them up the street a little, John," said De Cartienne, as he descended. "No need to advertise Cis's folly to the whole town," he added, in a lower tone. "Come on, Morton, we'll go and rout him out."

I stepped across the wet pavement after him and, stooping low down, crossed the threshold of

the "Rose and Crown." We passed by a room in which several labouring men were drinking mugs of beer, and entered the bar, in which a rosy-cheeked country damsel was exchanging noisy and not too choice badinage with one or two young men who hung about her. From here another door led into an inner room and at this De Cartienne somewhat ostentatiously knocked. There was a second's pause; then a clear, pleasant voice sang out "Come in!" and we entered.

It was a small, cosy room, not ill-furnished, and with a cheerful fire burning in the grate. Leaning against the mantelpiece, with his face towards us, was Cis, whose likeness to Lady Beatrice was so remarkable that I liked him heartily before we had exchanged a word. Standing by his side, with her head suspiciously near his shoulder, was a very fair girl, with nice figure and complexion and large blue eyes. Her face was certainly pretty, but it was not of a very high type of prettiness. The features, although regular of their sort, were not in any way refined or *spirituelle*, nor was there anything in her expression to redeem her from the mediocrity of good looks.

Still, she was undoubtedly a nice-looking girl, quite pretty enough to be the belle of a country place, and, on the whole, I was rather relieved to find her attractions of so ordinary a kind. There could scarcely be anything dangerous, I thought, in this good-humoured doll's face; she did not appear to have the daring or character to lead her boyish admirer over the borders of a spooning sentimentality. At any rate, that was not written in her face. A blunt physiognomist would probably have declared that there was not enough of the devil in her to fire the blood even of an impetuous, generous boy and urge him on to recklessness. It seemed so to me and I was glad of it.

Just at present there were traces of tears in her face and a generally woe-begone expression. Her companion, too, looked upset and sympathetic; but he glanced up with a bright smile when we entered.

"You're Philip Morton, I suppose?" he exclaimed, holding out his hand. "Glad to see you! Heard of you from my uncle, you know!"

I shook hands with him and he introduced me formally to the young woman at his side, calling her Miss Hart. Then he turned to me again.

"I quite meant to have been at the station to meet you," he said; "but we called here first and I—I was detained."

"It's of no consequence at all," I assured him. "Mr. De Cartienne was there."

"And Mr. De Cartienne having had to wait half an hour in the rain at that infernal old shed they call a station, requires a little refreshment," chimed in the person named. "Will the fair Millicent condescend, or shall I ring?"

She rose and, crossing the room, opened the door into the bar.

"Brandy-and-soda for me," ordered De Cartienne. "Cis is drinking whisky, I see, so he'll have another one, and we'll have a large bottle of Apollinaris between us. Morton, what'll you have?"

I decided upon claret and hot water, never having tasted spirits. De Cartienne made a wry face, but ordered it without remark.

"I say, Morton, I don't know what you'll think of us shacking about in a public-house like this, and bringing you here, your first night, too!" exclaimed Silchester, dragging his chair up to mine. "Bad form, isn't it? But it is so dull in the evenings and Milly's no end of a nice girl. No one could help liking her. Besides, she's in dreadful

trouble just now," he continued, dropping his voice. "Her father has disappeared suddenly. Awfully mysterious affair and no mistake. We can't make head or tail of it."

"It is uncommonly queer," admitted De Cartienne, who was lounging against the wall beside us. "I should have said that he'd gone off on the spree somewhere, but he couldn't have kept it up so long as this."

"Besides, he'd only a few pounds with him," Cecil remarked.

"Seems almost as though he'd come to grief in some way," I said.

"I daren't tell Milly, but I don't know what else to think," Cecil acknowledged.

A wild idea flashed for a moment into my mind, only to die away again almost as rapidly. It was too utterly improbable. Nevertheless, I asked Cecil a question with some curiosity:

"What sort of looking man was he?"

Cecil and De Cartienne both began to describe him at once, and, as De Cartienne modified or contradicted everything Cecil said, I was soon in a state of complete bewilderment as to the personality of the missing man. It seemed that he was short, and of medium height; that he was fair, and inclined to be dark, stout and thin, pale and ruddy. Milly put in a word or two now and then; and, what with De Cartienne dissenting from everything she said, and Cecil, a little perplexed, siding first with one and then with the other, the description naturally failed to carry to my mind the slightest impression of Mr. Hart's appearance. At last, rather impatiently, I stopped them.

"I'm afraid I am guilty of a somewhat unreasonable curiosity," I said, "for I haven't any real reason for asking; but haven't you a photo-

graph of your father, Miss Hart? I can't follow the description at all."

I happened to be looking towards De Cartienne while I made my request, and suddenly, from no apparent cause, I saw him start, and a strange look came into his face. At first I thought he must be ill; but, seeing my eyes fixed upon him, he seemed to recover himself instantly, though he was still deadly pale.

"Why, what the mischief are you staring at, Morton?" asked Cecil.

"Oh, nothing!" I answered. "I thought that De Cartienne was ill, that's all."

Cecil glanced at him curiously.

"By George! he does look rather white about the gills, doesn't he? Say, old chap, are you ill?"

De Cartienne shook his head.

"Oh, it's nothing!" he said carelessly. "Don't all stare at me as though I were some sort of natural curiosity, please. I feel a bit queer, but it's passing off. I think, if Miss Milly will allow me, I'll go and sit down in the other room by myself for a few minutes."

"I'll come with you!" exclaimed Cecil, springing up. "Poor old chap!"

"No, don't, please!" protested De Cartienne. "I would rather be alone; I would indeed. I shall be all right directly."

He quitted the room by another door, and we three were left alone. Cecil and Miss Milly began a conversation in a low tone, and I, feeling somewhat *de trop*, took up a local newspaper and affected to be engaged in its contents. After a few minutes, however, Cecil remembered my existence.

"By the bye, Milly," he said, "Morton was asking you whether you had not a photograph of your

father. There's one in the sitting-room, isn't there ? "

She nodded.

" Well, we'll go and look at it and see how Leonard is. He looked uncommonly seedy, didn't he ? Come along, Morton."

We crossed a narrow passage and entered a small parlour. Miss Hart walked up to the mantelpiece and Cecil and I remained looking round.

" Hallo ! " he exclaimed. " Leonard isn't here ; I wonder where——"

He was interrupted by a cry of blank surprise from Miss Hart.

" What's the matter now ? How you startled me, Milly ! " he exclaimed, hurrying to her side. " What is it ? "

" Why, the photograph ! "

" What about it ? "

" It's gone ! "

CHAPTER XXVII.

LEONARD DE CARTIENNE.

We all three stood and looked at one another for a moment, Milly Hart with her finger still pointing to the vacant place where the photograph had been. Then Cecil broke into a short laugh.

"We're looking very tragical about it," he said lightly. "Mysterious joint disappearance of Leonard de Cartienne and a photograph of Mr. Hart. Now, if it had been a photograph of a pretty girl instead of a middle-aged man, we might have connected the two. Hallo!"

He broke off in his speech and turned round. Standing in the doorway, looking at us, was Leonard de Cartienne, with a slight smile on his thin lips.

"Behold the missing link—I mean man!" exclaimed Cecil. "Good old Leonard! Do you know, you gave us quite a fright. We expected to find you here and the room was empty. Are you better?"

"Yes, thanks! I'm all right now," he answered. "I've been out in the yard and had a blow. What's Milly looking so scared about? And what was it I heard you say about a photograph?"

"Father's likeness has gone," she explained, turning round with tears in her eyes. "It was there on the mantelpiece this afternoon and now, when we came in to look at it, it has gone."

"I should think that, if it really has disappeared," De Cartienne remarked incredulously, "the servant must have moved it. Ask her."

Miss Hart rang the bell and in the meantime we looked about the room. It was all in vain. We could find no trace of it, nor could the servant who answered the summons give us any information. She had seen it in its usual place early in the morning when she had been dusting. Since then she had not entered the room.

"Deuced queer thing!" declared Cecil, when at last we had relinquished the search. "Deuced queer!" he repeated meditatively, with his hands thrust deep down in his trousers' pockets and his eyes resting idly upon De Cartienne's face. "But we can't do anything more, that's certain. We really must be off, Milly. We've been here almost an hour already, and Brandy and Soda must be getting restless, and you must be famished, I'm sure, Morton. Come along! Good-bye, Milly! Keep your spirits up, old girl! The governor'll be bound to turn up again in a day or two. And don't you worry about the photograph. It must be somewhere."

"But it isn't!" she declared tearfully. "We've looked everywhere! Oh, what shall I do?"

Cecil assumed a most lugubrious expression and looked down sympathetically into her tear-stained face. She certainly was uncommonly pretty.

"You go on, you fellows," he said. "I'll be out in a minute. I'll drive, Leonard. Don't think you're quite up to it."

De Cartienne nudged my arm and we went off together and made our way up the street to the inn, under the covered archway of which the trap was drawn up. In a few minutes Cecil joined us.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting," he said, as he lighted a cigarette and clambered up to the

box-seat. "No, you come in front, Morton. That's right. Very odd about that photograph, isn't it? It's gone and no mistake. We've been having another look round."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed De Cartienne impatiently. "What a fuss about a trifle! A girl has no memory at all! I expect she moved it herself. Bet you it turns up by the morning."

"I think not," Cecil replied quietly, as he gathered up the reins. "Now then, hold on behind!"

We rattled off down the street and out into the open country again at a pace which precluded any conversation. The low hedges and stunted trees by the roadside seemed to fly past us, and a sudden turn, which almost jerked me from my seat, brought us in sight of a wide semi-circle of twinkling lights, which seemed to stretch right across the horizon.

"What are they?" I asked, pointing forward.

"Those? Oh, fishing-smacks!" answered Cecil.

"Is that the sea, then?" I asked eagerly.

He burst out laughing.

"Why, what else do you suppose it is?" he exclaimed. "Can't you hear it?"

I bent my head and listened. The faint night breeze was just sufficient to carry to our ears the dull, monotonous roar of an incoming tide.

"Not a very cheerful row, is it?" observed Cecil.

"Cheerful! I call it the most infernally miserable sound I ever heard!" growled De Cartienne, from the back seat, "enough to give a fellow the horrors any day!"

"See that bright light close ahead?" said Cecil, pointing with his whip. "That's Borden Tower, where we hang out, you know. We shall be there in a minute or two."

"Perhaps!" growled De Cartienne from behind,

making a nervous clutch at the side of the trap. "Cis, my dear fellow, you're not driving a fire-engine, and there's nothing to be gained by this confounded hurry. George! I was nearly out that time."

We had turned round a sharp corner into a winding drive, devoid of trees, and planted only with stunted shrubs. On one side, between us and the shore, was a long, irregular plantation of small fir trees, through which the night wind was moaning with a sound not unlike the more distant roar of the sea. Directly in front loomed a high dark building, standing out with almost startling abruptness against a void of sky and moor.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Cecil, pulling up with a flourish before the front entrance. "John, help down the poor, nervous invalid behind, and take Brandy and Soda round to the stable at once. They're too hot to stand still in this damp air a second."

We passed across a large but somewhat dreary hall into a warm, comfortable dining-room. A bright fire was blazing in the grate, and a table in the centre of the room was very tastefully laid for dinner.

"Make yourself at home, Morton!" exclaimed Cecil, standing on the hearthrug and stretching out a numbed hand to the blaze. "Draw an easy-chair up to the fire while James unpacks your traps and sees to your room. Leonard, ring the bell, there's a good fellow, and let them know we're ready for dinner."

"Thanks; I think I'll go upstairs at once," I remarked.

"All right! Here's James; he'll show you your room. One servant between three of us now. Good old James! I say, Morton, no swallow-tails, you know."

I nodded and followed the man, who was waiting in the doorway, to my room.

After my bare-floored, low-ceilinged attic at the farm, the apartment into which I was ushered seemed a very temple of luxury. There was a soft carpet upon the floor, many easy chairs, an Oriental divan, mirrors, and solid, handsomely carved furniture. Leading out of it on one side was a bath-room and on the other a small, cosy sitting-room, or study.

"Is there anything more I can do for you, sir?" inquired the man, after he had poured out my hot water and set out the contents of my portmanteau.

I shook my head and dismissed him. After a very brief toilet I hastened downstairs.

The dinner was remarkably good and I was very hungry; but I found time to notice two things. The first was that Cecil drank a great deal more wine than at his age was good for him; and the second, that De Cartienne, who drank very little himself, concealed that fact as far as he was able and passed the bottle continually to Cecil. This did not much surprise me, for I had already formed my own opinion of De Cartienne.

After dinner the man who waited upon us brought in some coffee and withdrew. Cecil, whose checks were a little flushed, and whose eyes were sparkling with more than ordinary brightness, rose and stretched himself.

"I say, Leonard," he exclaimed, "let's adjourn to your room and have a hand at cards! Shall we?"

De Cartienne shrugged his shoulders, but did not offer to move.

"I'm not particularly keen on cards to-night," he remarked, with a yawn. "I believe, if you

had your own way, you'd play from morning to night."

"Oh, hang it all, there's nothing else to be done!" Cecil answered. "If we stay down here we can't smoke, and we shall have old Grumps back bothering presently."

"I forgot we couldn't smoke," De Cartienne said, rising. "Come along, then!"

"You don't mind, Morton, do you?" Cecil asked, turning towards me. "It's awfully cosy up in Len's room."

"Certainly not," I answered, finishing my coffee. "I'll come, but I can't play."

"Oh, that doesn't matter! You can watch us for a bit, and you'll soon pick it up. Hi, James!" Cecil sang out, as that worthy showed himself at the door for a minute, "bring us up some whisky and half a dozen bottles of seltzer water into Mr. De Cartienne's room, will you? Look sharp, there's a good fellow!"

De Cartienne's rooms, especially his study, were furnished far more luxuriously than mine and in excellent taste. The walls and chimney-piece were covered with charming little sketches, a few foreign prints, photographs, and dainty little trifles of bric-a-brac. Except for the photographs, some of which were a little *risque*, it was more like a lady's boudoir than a man's sitting-room.

De Cartienne and Cecil seated themselves at a small round table and began to play almost immediately. I drew an easy chair up to the fire, and closed my eyes as though I intended going to sleep. As a matter of fact, I meant to watch the game, and closely, too. But Fate decided otherwise. I was really very sleepy, and, though I struggled against it, I was obliged to yield in the end. I fell asleep, and it must have been nearly two hours before I was awakened by a touch on my arm.

"Wake up, Morton, old chap! It's time we were off to our rooms."

I sat up and looked at my watch. It was past midnight.

Cecil was leaning against the table, with his hands in his pockets, looking pale and weary, but exultant.

"I've been in rare luck to-night!" he exclaimed. "Won a couple of ponies from poor old Len, and a whole hatful of I O U's. Here they go!" And he swept a little pile of crumpled papers into the fire.

I glanced at De Cartienne to see how losing had affected him. Not in the ordinary way, at any rate. He was sitting back in his chair, with his arms crossed, a cigarette between his teeth and an inscrutable smile upon his thin lips. Somehow I did not like his expression. There was something a little too closely approaching contempt in it as he watched Cecil's action and listened to the exultant ring in his tone—something which seemed to express a latent power to reverse the result with ease at any time he thought proper.

It was rushing to conclusions, no doubt; but as I glanced from Cecil's boyish, handsome face, a trifle dissipated just now, but open and candid, to the pale, sallow countenance, the large black eyes, and cynical, callous expression of his friend, it seemed to me that I was looking from the face of the tempted to the face of the tempter. The one seemed like the evil genius of the other.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"AS ROME DOES."

I AWOKE on the following morning with that vague, peculiar sense of having entered upon an altogether new phase of life. By degrees my semi-somnolent faculties reasserted themselves and I remembered where I was. My new life had indeed begun in earnest.

I sprang out of bed and pulled up the blind. It was a very strange prospect I looked out upon, after the luxuriant hilly scenery of the home where I had lived all my life. Before me was a flat, uncultivated common, dotted here and there with a few stunted gorse-bushes and numerous sand-heaps. Farther away a long stretch of shingle sloped down to the foam-crested sea which, under the grey, sunless sky of the early winter's morning, had a dull, forbidding appearance. Though it was not an inviting prospect, there was something attractive in its novelty, and, dropping the blind, I hastened into the bath-room and began dressing.

It was past eight o'clock when I got downstairs, but I saw no one about, so I let myself out by the front door and walked down the drive. The grounds were small and soon explored, and, having exhausted them, I passed through a wicket-gate into

a little plantation of pine-trees and thence out on to the common. Then, for the first time in my life, I felt a strong sea-breeze, and, with my cap in my hand and my face turned seawards, I stood for a few moments thoroughly enjoying it.

"Glad to see that you're an early riser, Mr. Morton. It's a habit which, I'm sorry to say, my other pupils have not acquired."

I turned round with a start. A tall, thin man, somewhat past middle age, with iron-grey hair and thin, regular features, was standing by my side. His eyes were the eyes of a visionary and a poet, and his worn, thoughtful face bore the unmistakable stamp of the student. I liked his appearance, careless and dishevelled though it was in point of attire, and knowing that this must be Dr. Randall, I felt a keen sense of relief.

For, bearing in mind the evident habits and last night's occupation of Silchester and De Cartienne, I had begun to wonder somewhat apprehensively what manner of man the master of such pupils might be. Now I felt sure that the idea which had first occurred to me had been the correct one, and that the doings of the night before were carried on altogether under the rose. The man James had all the appearance of a servant whom it would be easy to bribe. This without doubt had been done.

"Perhaps they haven't lived all their lives in the country, sir, as I have," I answered. "I have always been used to getting up early."

"So you are my new pupil?" he said. "Well, Mr. Morton, I'm very pleased to see you, and I have an idea that we shall get on very well together. I was going to walk down to the sea. Will you come with me?"

I followed him along the tortuous path to the

shore, and on the way he questioned me about my acquirements, putting me through a sort of *vivâ-voce* examination, the result of which appeared to satisfy him.

"This is quite a pleasant surprise to me," he said, as we turned back to the house. "You are almost as advanced as De Cartienne and far more so than Silchester. I suppose you mean to matriculate?"

I told him that I thought so, but he scarcely seemed to hear. Apparently his mind had wandered to some other subject and for nearly a quarter of an hour he remained absorbed. I learned afterwards that this was a habit of his.

With a start he came to himself, and, apologising for his absent-mindedness, led the way back to the house and into the breakfast-room. The cloth was laid for four and the urn was hissing upon the table; but there was no one else down.

"Is neither Lord Silchester nor Mr. De Cartienne up yet, James?" inquired Dr. Randall.

James believed not, but would ascertain. In a few moments he returned.

"Lord Silchester desires me to say that he was reading late last night, sir, and has overslept himself; but he will be down as soon as possible," James announced solemnly.

Remembering that James had been in attendance upon us in De Cartienne's rooms last night, I thought that this was rather cool. But it was no concern of mine and I held my peace.

Dr. Randall frowned slightly and looked vexed.

"It appears to me that Silchester does most of his reading at night," he remarked. "I could wish that the results of it were a little more apparent. And Mr. De Cartienne, James? Has he overslept himself, too?"

"Mr. De Cartienne will be here immediately, sir," the man announced.

We began breakfast. When we were about half-way through the meal, the door opened and De Cartienne appeared. He cast an apprehensive glance at me, and then, seeing that Dr. Randall greeted him as usual, looked relieved.

Presently the doctor left the table, bidding us join him in the study in half an hour. Directly the door had closed De Cartienne leaned back in his chair and laughed softly to himself.

"Whatever made you get up so early?" he asked, looking at me curiously. "Gave me quite a turn when I heard that you were down and alone with Grumps; and Cis was in an awful funk. We were afraid that you might let out something about last night—accidentally, of course; and then there would have been the deuce to pay and no mistake. James, take my plate and bring me a brandy-and-soda. Take care the doctor doesn't see you."

"Whose servant is James?" I asked, as he disappeared—"yours or the doctor's?"

"The doctor imagines that he's his, I suppose; but he gets a lot more from Cis and me than Grumps pays him," De Cartienne explained carelessly. "I knew him before he came here, and got him to apply for the situation by promising to double his wages."

"And the advantages?" I asked.

"Obvious enough, I should think. You've seen some of them already, and you'll see some more before you've been here long."

"I daresay. Perhaps it would be as well for me to tell you, De Cartienne, that what I have seen I don't like."

"Very likely not," he answered carelessly. "I thought directly I saw you that you were a bit of a prig—I beg your pardon, I should say, rather

strait-laced. Still, I don't suppose you'll think it worth your while to interfere. You can go your way and Cis and I can go ours."

"That would make it a little dull for me," I said slowly. "Perhaps I am not quite so strait-laced as you seem to think. I suppose you would teach me how to play cards, if I desired to learn?"

"Oh, certainly! And how to use this also," he remarked, drawing a latchkey from his pocket and swinging it carelessly backwards and forwards.

"I think I will learn, then," I answered. "After all, this place would be ghastly dull if I didn't do as you fellows do."

He looked at me searchingly out of his keen dark eyes, but I sipped my coffee leisurely and seemed to be quite unconscious of his scrutiny. Apparently he was satisfied, for I saw the hard lines of his mouth relax a little and he smiled—a disagreeable smile of contemptuous triumph.

"I've no doubt you'll prove an apt pupil," he remarked. "Have you finished? If so, we'll go and have a cigarette in my room before we start work with Grumps."

"Does the doctor allow smoking?" I asked.

"To tell you the truth, Morton, we've never asked him. What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over, you know. We go on that principle, and smoke in our rooms with the doors shut and windows open. Come along!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DINNER-PARTY SUB ROSA.

In less than a week's time I was master of the state of affairs at Borden Tower. Dr. Randall, with the best possible intentions, was the worst possible man that could have been chosen for the guardianship of two such pupils as Lord Silchester and Leonard De Cartienne. He was a scholar and a pedant, utterly unsuspicious and ignorant of the ways of the world, himself so truthful and honourable that he could scarcely have imagined deceit possible in others, and certainly not in his own wards. Of the servants, James and his wife were the only ones in authority, and they were the tools of De Cartienne.

The latter I could not quite understand. The only thing about him perfectly clear was that he was just the worst companion possible for Silchester. For the rest, he was so clever that his presence here at all as a pupil seemed unnecessary. He appeared to be rich and he took a deep interest of some sort in Cecil. Seemingly it was a friendly interest, but of that I did not feel assured. At any rate, it was an injurious association for Cecil, and I determined to do everything in my power to counteract it.

To strike at once, to attempt to show him the folly of the courses into which he was being

led, I saw would be futile. I must have time and opportunity. Any violent measures in such a case would be worse than useless. My only course, obnoxious though it was, was to join them in their pursuits and try to gain some sort of influence over Cecil, while I kept him as far as possible from falling into further mischief.

Accordingly, on the first evening after my arrival at Borden Tower, I was initiated into the mysteries of poker and Prussian bank, and on subsequent occasions I either joined them or looked on. The result in the main was pretty much as I had expected. De Cartienne won always when the stakes were very large, and Lord Silchester when they were scarcely worth having.

The earlier part of the day was by far the pleasanter to me. In the morning we worked with Dr. Randall; in the afternoon we always walked or rode—in either case, a visit to the "Rose and Crown" was an invariable part of the programme—and in the evening, after dinner, we were supposed to read until ten o'clock, although the manner in which we really spent that portion of the day was far less profitable.

I had intended paying a special visit to Miss Milly Hart on my own account; but either by accident or design—at the time I was not sure which—De Cartienne always seemed to frustrate my plans. Even to myself I would not acknowledge that I had any other motive save pure curiosity; but I was still determined by some means or other to see a photograph of the missing Mr. Hart. The strange disappearance of the one in the sitting-room at the inn—it had never been found—puzzled me, and whenever I caught myself thinking of the incident, it was always in connection with Leonard De Cartienne. It seemed very absurd, when I considered the matter calmly, but never-

theless I could not escape from it. It haunted me, as ideas sometimes will.

One afternoon, about two months after my arrival at Borden Towers, Cecil and I were reading together in the study—or, rather, I was endeavouring to encourage one of his rare fits of industry by helping him through a stiff page of Livy—when the door opened suddenly and De Cartienne entered with an open telegram in his hand. Seeing me, he stopped short and frowned.

"Hallo, Len! What's up?" Cecil exclaimed. "What have you got there? A telegram?"

De Cartienne nodded and, after a moment's hesitation, handed it over.

"It's from Fothergill," he explained. "He is coming over to-night, and wants us to dine with him."

"Should like to awfully," Cecil said, "but I don't see how we can. Old Grumps wouldn't let us go, of course, and I don't see how we can manage it without his knowing."

"Don't you? Well, I do," De Cartienne remarked drily. "Grumps is going over to Belscombe this evening to take the chair at the literary society there. He'll have to dine at six and leave at a quarter to seven. I know that, because I heard him give his orders. That will leave us plenty of time to get down into the town by eight o'clock; and we shall be all right for coming back, of course."

"That's capital!" declared Cecil, shutting up his Livy with a bang. "We will have our revenge on old Fothergill to-night. Just what I've been looking forward to."

De Cartienne shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "I fancy Fothergill is a bit too good for us. I shan't be very keen on cards to-night, I can tell you. I

lost more money than I cared about last time he was here."

Cecil laughed carelessly.

"You didn't lose as much as I did," he remarked. "But, then, Fothergill had all the luck. I never remember such a run of trumps as he held in that last deal; and you played villainously, you know —gave him no end of tricks."

The very faintest suspicion of a smile—an evil smile it was—trembled on De Cartienne's lips, and he turned away towards the window as though to hide it.

"I wasn't in very good form that night," he acknowledged. "I must make up for it to-night, if we can get Fothergill to give us our revenge."

Cecil drummed upon the table with his fingers and raised his eyebrows slightly.

"He can't very well refuse if we ask for it, can he?"

"I suppose not," De Cartienne answered, lounging across the room towards the door. "I'll go and see James and let him know that we shall want the latchkey."

"All right. And I say, Len," Cecil continued, "we must take Morton with us, of course."

De Cartienne turned round with an angry frown upon his dark face.

"I scarcely see how that would be possible," he said stiffly. "I think it would be taking rather a liberty with Fothergill. He only asks us two."

In other circumstances I should promptly have refused to be one of the party, especially as the invitation appeared to come from a friend of De Cartienne's. But the darkening shade which I had seen flash across De Cartienne's face reawakened all my suspicions with regard to him and I instantly determined that, by some means or other, I would go. His evident reluctance to invite me only

strengthened my intention, so, although he looked at me as if expecting to hear me express my indifference as to whether I went or not, I purposely refrained from doing anything of the sort.

"Oh, that's all rot!" Cecil protested. "We can't go off and leave Morton boxed up here by himself."

"I don't suppose Morton would care much about it," said De Cartienne sullenly.

"On the contrary, I should enjoy it very much indeed," I interposed; "although, of course, I don't wish to go if you think that your friend would object," I added blandly. "It's rather dull here by oneself."

"Of course it is! Morton, old chap, you shall go with us, never fear!" Cecil declared vigorously. "Tell you what, Len, if you won't do the agreeable and make things right with Fothergill—as you can, if you like, of course—I shan't go, so there! Which is it to be—both or neither?"

"Both, of course," De Cartienne answered, with as good grace as possible. "I shouldn't have thought Morton would have cared about it, that's all. Be ready punctually at half-past seven, you men."

"All right!" exclaimed Cecil, delighted at getting his own way for a change. "Good old Len! Morton, pitch that beastly Livy into the drawer and come and change your things. We'll have some fun to-night!"

CHAPTER XXX.

ECARTÉ WITH MR. FOTHERGILL.

At a little before eight o'clock De Cartienne, Cecil, and I presented ourselves at the bar of the "Bull" Hotel, and inquired for Mr. Fothergill. We were shown at once by a waiter into a small private sitting-room, brilliantly illuminated and unmistakably cosy. Under the chandelier was a small round table glittering with plate and flowers; and, standing upon the hearthrug, critically surveying it, was a middle-aged, dapper-looking little man, in well-cut evening clothes, with a white camellia in his buttonhole.

His hair was slightly tinged with grey, but his moustache was still jet-black and elaborately curled and waxed. His forehead was low and his full red lips and slightly hooked nose gave him something of a Jewish appearance. He had just missed being handsome, and, similarly, had just missed being good form; at least, so it seemed to me from my first rapid survey, and I did not afterwards change my opinion.

Directly we entered the room he moved forward to meet us, with a smile which revealed a very fine set of teeth. I watched him closely as he noted the addition to the party, but he betrayed no surprise or annoyance. On the contrary, when Cecil had introduced me as his friend and fellow-

pupil at Borden Tower, he welcomed me with a courtesy which was a little effusive. On the whole, I decided that his manners were in his favour.

There was some casual conversation, an explanation rather more elaborate than seemed to me necessary of his flying visit to Little Drayton, and then dinner was announced. Everything had evidently been carefully ordered and prepared and was of the best. Mr. Fothergill, whatever his shortcomings, made a capital host; and his talk, though a trifle slangy and coarse at times, was amusing in the extreme. Altogether, the dinner was a success in every respect save one. For four men, two of whom were under twenty, there was a great deal too much wine drunk.

I think I scarcely noticed it until the cloth was removed and dessert placed upon the table. Then a curious sense of exhilaration in my own spirits warned me to be careful and I looked round at once at the others.

Cecil sat directly opposite to me and I saw at a glance how it was with him. His hair, which he always kept rather long, but carefully parted, was disarranged and untidy; his neat tie had become crumpled and had slipped up on one side; his eyes were sparkling, as though with some unusual excitement, and there was a glow of colour in his cheeks almost hectic in its intensity.

At the head of the table our host was still smiling and debonair, looking as though he had been drinking nothing stronger than water; and opposite to him De Cartienne was leaning back in his chair with a faint tinge of colour in his olive cheeks and a peculiar glitter in his dark eyes which was anything but pleasant to look upon. Altogether, the appearance of the trio was like a cold douche to me and brought me swiftly back to my former

watchfulness. I felt instinctively there was mischief brewing.

"I say, Fothergill, let's have a hand at cards!" Cecil exclaimed, breaking a momentary silence. "You owe us a revenge, you know! George! didn't you clean us out last time we played! We'll clean you out to-night, hanged if we won't! What shall it be?"

Mr. Fothergill shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"Cards — cards! It's always cards!" he answered lightly. "Can't you think of something else to do?"

"Yes; hang cards!" muttered De Cartienne.

"All right, I'm agreeable! But what the mischief else is there to do in this dull hole?" asked Cecil discontentedly.

"Oh, let's have a chat and a few more glasses of wine!" suggested Mr. Fothergill. "I'm so lucky that I hate to play at cards. I always win."

"Do you?" remarked Cecil, a little pettishly. "Well, look here, Fothergill! I'll play you at any game you like to-night and beat you—so there! I challenge you! You owe me a revenge. I want it!"

Mr. Fothergill looked a little bored.

"Of course, if you put it in that way," he said, "you leave me no alternative. But, mind, I warn you beforehand, Silchester, I'm bound to win! I don't want to win your money—I had enough last time I was here—but if we play I shall win, whether I care about it or not. I'm in a tremendous vein of luck just now."

"We'll see about that," Cecil answered doggedly. "Let's ring for some cards."

"Or, rather, don't let's play here at all," interrupted De Cartienne. "The people are awfully

old-fashioned and particular and may want to turn us out at eleven o'clock."

"By George! we'll go round to the 'Rose and Crown!'" exclaimed Cecil. "I haven't been there for two days. It's a decent little place and we can do what we like there," he added, turning to Mr. Fothergill. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not the least in the world!" declared our host, rising and stretching himself. "Any place will do for me. The sooner the better, if we are going, though. I don't want to be particularly late."

We all rose, despatched the waiter for our overcoats and sallied out into the cool night air. After the heated atmosphere of the room in which we had been dining, the wintry breeze came as a sudden swift tonic. At the corner of the street, looking seaward, Cecil and I stopped simultaneously and bared our heads.

"By George! how delicious a walk would be!" he exclaimed, fanning himself with his cap. "I say, Phil, old chap, suppose we bolt and do the seashore as far as Litton Bay?"

"A splendid idea!" I exclaimed, taking him at his word and linking his arm in mine. "Let's do it!"

He burst out laughing.

"Why, Phil, you know we can't!" he said. "I was only joking. Why, what on earth would Fothergill think of us serving him such a trick as that?"

"Oh, hang Fothergill!" I cried. "He only wants to win your money. I wouldn't play with the fellow if I were you, Cecil. Can't you see he's a cad?"

He looked at me, confounded.

"Why, hang it all," he said, "how can you refuse to play with a man after you've eaten his

dinner? Besides, can't you see that it isn't he who wants to play at all? It was I who proposed it and even then he wasn't keen."

"All beastly cunning!" I muttered angrily. But I could say no more, for De Cartienne and Mr. Fothergill had retraced their steps to look for us and Cecil had started off towards them.

In a few moments we reached the "Rose and Crown" and walked straight into the little parlour at the back. Miss Milly was sitting there by herself in semi-darkness, with a very disconsolate face. She brightened up, however, at our entrance.

"All by yourself, Milly?" exclaimed Cecil, letting go my arm and moving to her side. "In tears, too, I believe! No news, I suppose?"

She shook her head sadly.

"None! I have almost lost hope," she added.

Then she glanced questioningly at Mr. Fothergill, and Cecil introduced him in an informal sort of way and explained our visit.

"We've come to drink up all your wine and have a quiet game at cards instead of staying all the evening at the 'Bull.' You can put us in the sitting-room out of the way, can't you?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered eagerly. "How good of you to come here! We've been dreadfully quiet the last few days—scarcely anyone in at all, and I have been so dull. Come this way, please. I'm so glad I had the fire lit."

She led us into the little sitting-room, where we had gone to look for Mr. Hart's photograph on my first visit to the place. I pointed to the spot where it had been.

"You haven't found the portrait yet?" I remarked.

She shook her head and looked distressed.

"Please don't talk about it," she said. "It

seems as though it must have been spirited away and it makes me feel uncomfortable even to think about it."

We seated ourselves around the table and Mr. Fothergill, producing two packs of cards from his pocket, began to deal. At the end of an hour Cecil had won nearly fifty pounds, I was as I had started, and De Cartienne and Mr. Fothergill were about equal losers.

"I'm getting sick of this!" I declared. "Leave me out of this deal, will you?"

They assented and I crossed the room to where Milly was sitting. Pretending to examine the fancy-work upon which she was engaged, I bent close over her.

"Miss Milly, I want to ask you a question, without letting the others hear," I said softly. "Do you understand?"

She nodded. Her large blue eyes, upturned to mine, were filled with innocent wonder.

I glanced towards the table. As I had expected, De Cartienne was watching us, and I could see that he was straining every nerve to overhear our conversation.

"I think I'm about tired of it, too!" he exclaimed, suddenly throwing down his cards and rising; but Cecil laid his hand on his shoulder and forced him down.

"Nonsense, man! You must play out your hand, at any rate. Then you may leave off as soon as you like."

De Cartienne resumed his seat with evident reluctance. I bent over Milly again.

"Has anyone else one of those photographs of your father?" I asked. "Is there anyone from whom you could borrow one?"

She shook her head and looked towards the empty frame.

"That was the only one," she answered.

"Where did he have them taken?"

"At Lawrence's, just across the way."

"And when?"

"About nine months ago, I think it was. Why do you ask, Mr. Morton?" she added anxiously.

"I will tell you another time," I answered, in a low tone.

I glanced towards the table as I said this and was just in time to see De Cartienne bend over towards Cecil and whisper something in his ear. The latter looked round at us at once.

"You two seem to have found something interesting to talk about," he remarked, glancing towards Milly as though requiring an explanation.

"We haven't," she answered, with a sigh. "Mr. Morton was just asking me—— Oh, Mr. Morton, you're treading on my foot!"

I withdrew my foot and tried the effect of a warning glance, but it was of no avail.

"Mr. Morton was asking me," she continued, "whether I had not another of those photographs."

"And have you—has anyone?" interrupted De Cartienne, fixing his piercing black eyes upon her.

She shook her head.

"No; but perhaps I can get some. They were taken at Lawrence's and I suppose he has the negative."

I glanced quickly at De Cartienne. He seemed profoundly uninterested and was trying to build a house of the cards he had thrown down. Either he must be a perfect actor, or my vague suspicions were very ill-founded at that moment. I could not decide which.

"Had enough cards, Cis?" he asked abruptly.

"Not I. We'll leave you out for a bit, though. Fothergill and I are going to play ecarté."

De Cartienne shrugged his shoulders and threw himself on the sofa.

"I pity you, then," he said drily. "You'll soon see the back of that little pile of winnings. Fothergill's a bit too good for you."

"Well, we shall see," Cecil answered, laughing confidently. "I'm not a bad hand at ecarté myself."

They began to play. Presently De Cartienne left the room and returned with two glasses in his hand.

"Have a lemon-squash, Morton?" he asked carelessly. "There's only a drop of whisky in it."

I accepted, for I was thirsty, and half emptied at a draught the tumbler which he handed me. As I put down the glass I caught a grim smile on De Cartienne's sallow face. But what it meant I could not tell, although it made me strangely uneasy.

I watched the play for a few minutes and, to my surprise, Cecil was still winning. Then gradually a powerful, overmastering sleepiness crept over me. I tried to stave it off by walking about, by talking to Milly, by concentrating my thoughts upon the play. It was useless. I felt my eyes closing and the sounds and voices in the room grew dimmer and less distinct. For a while I remained in a semi-conscious state—half awake and half asleep—by sheer force of will. But in the end I was conquered. A mist hung before my eyes and all sound died away. I fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

When I awoke it was with the dulled senses and aching head which usually follow either a drugged sleep or an unnaturally heavy one. I sat up on the sofa, rubbing my eyes and staring around in blank surprise. Daylight was streaming in through the chinks of the drawn blinds, but the gas was still burning with a dull, sickly light.

The table betrayed all the signs of an all-night orgie. Several packs of cards were lying strewn over the crumpled, ash-scattered cloth. There were half-a-dozen tumblers—one nearly full, another broken into pieces—and several empty soda-water bottles lay on the floor.

But the most ghastly sight of all was Cecil's face. He sat on a chair drawn up to the table, his chin fallen upon his folded arms, dark rims under his eyes, and without a single vestige of colour in his ashen face. There was no one else in the room.

I sprang to my feet and hurried to his side.

"Cecil! Cecil!" I cried. "What's the matter, old chap? Wake up, for Heaven's sake, and tell me what has happened!"

He pulled himself together and struggled to his feet. Then he looked round the room and finally

into my anxious face, with an odd little laugh, strained and unnatural.

"I've about done it this time," he said. "By George! Let's clear out of this before Milly comes down. I shouldn't like her to know that we've been here all night. Poor little girl! She'd never forgive herself for letting us play here at all."

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Fothergill has gone back to his hotel and Leonard went with him. I said I'd wake you and we'd follow directly, but I think I must have been dozing."

"We must go, and at once," I said, "or we shall never be back before the doctor gets down. Come, Cecil! Don't tell me anything yet."

I linked my arm in his and drew him out of the room. We crept softly down the passage and out at the back door. I was afraid to ask him questions and he seemed in no hurry to disclose what had happened, so we hurried along in silence, Cecil baring his head to the strong sea-breeze which blew in our teeth when we had left the town behind us and had all the effect of a strong, invigorating tonic.

At every step I felt my head grow clearer, and, glancing at Cecil, I saw the colour creeping back into his cheeks with every breath he took of the salt air which came sweeping across the sandy, barren country between us and the sea.

When at last we reached our destination and had cautiously made our way up to the back entrance, he hesitated. Opposite to us was the pine-plantation, which led down to the sea, and between the thickly growing black trunks a curious light shone and glistened. I had lived all my life in the country and knew well what it was, but Cecil turned round and watched it with amazement.

"Look, Phil!" he whispered. "What's that

light? It seems as though the plantation were on fire!"

"It's the sunrise," I answered. "Shall we go and see it?"

He nodded, and we stole across the lawn, through the wicket-gate and along the narrow, winding path, thickly strewn with dried leaves and fir-cones, down towards the shore. We were just in time to see the final effect. A rim of the sun had already crept into sight, casting brilliant, scintillating reflections upon the dancing waves, and the eastern sky was tinged from the arc of the heavens to the horizon with streaks of brilliantly-hued, fantastically-shaped cloudlets, strewn upon a background of the lightest transparent blue.

Far off the sails of a few fishing-smacks glittered like gossamer wings upon a fairy ocean; and farther away still, where the banks of orange and azure clouds seemed to sink into a blazing sea of polished glass, the white funnel of a passing steamer shone like a pillar of fire.

It was a sight so new to Cecil that he stood spell-bound, with a look of wondering awe upon his pale face. And it was not until we had gazed to the full and were retracing our steps in silence through the plantation that I cared to speak of the events of the night.

"Philip," he said solemnly, when I mentioned the subject, "there's no one to blame for this night's work but myself. To do Leonard and that fellow Fothergill justice, they both continually urged me to leave off playing, but I wouldn't. It seemed as though the luck must change at every deal and so I went on, and on, and on. What a fool I was!"

"And the result?" I asked anxiously.

"I owe Fothergill between six and seven hundred pounds and I haven't as many shillings."

I stopped short and looked at him in horror.

"Seven hundred pounds! Why, Cis, how on earth came you to play up to that figure and with a man you know so little of?"

"Oh, the man's all right—at least, he's no sharper, if you mean that!" Cecil answered doggedly. "It was my own fault altogether. He's a better player than I am, and, of course, won."

"But he ought not to have gone on," I protested. "I don't know much about such matters, but I feel sure that a gentleman wouldn't sit down and win seven hundred pounds from a boy of your age. You're not eighteen yet, you know, Cis."

"I don't quite see what age has got to do with it," he answered gloomily. "As regards Fothergill, I don't feel particularly sweet on him just now, as you may imagine; but it wasn't his fault at all. I made him go on, and, you know, the winner is a great deal in the hands of the loser in a case of that sort. He kept on wanting to go and he went at last. I should have gone on playing till now, I think, if he hadn't."

"When does he expect you to settle up?" I asked.

"I've got to see him this afternoon. I say, you'll come down with me, old chap, won't you?" he pleaded. "I shall have to ask for a little time, of course."

"Yes, I'll go with you," I promised. "How shall you try to raise the money?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," he acknowledged gloomily. "I've overdrawn my allowance already several hundreds. The mater is as poor as a church mouse and I simply daren't ask my Uncle Ravenor, though he's as rich as Crœsus. He might disinherit me."

We reached the house and stole softly up the

back stairs to our rooms. Cecil threw himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed. But I was in no humour for sleep, and after a cold bath I dressed and got downstairs in time for breakfast. To my surprise, De Cartienne was in the morning-room, carefully dressed as usual and with no sign in his appearance or manner of having been out all night. He was chatting lightly with Dr. Randall about some trivial matter connected with the meeting which the latter had attended the previous evening.

"Cecil is late again," remarked the doctor, with a frown, as we began breakfast. "James, go to Lord Silchester's room and ask him how long he will be."

James retired and reappeared in a few minutes with a grave face.

"Lord Silchester desires me to beg you to excuse him this morning," was the message which he brought back. "He has a very bad headache and has had no sleep."

Dr. Randall, who was one of the kindest-hearted men breathing, looked compassionate.

"Dear me!" he said. "I'm very sorry to hear that! Certainly we will excuse him. Will he have anything sent up?"

"A cup of tea, sir, only. I have ordered it in the kitchen."

"Poor fellow! It's strange how he suffers from these attacks! I'm afraid he can't be very strong," remarked the doctor absently, as he buttered himself a piece of toast.

De Cartienne and I exchanged glances, but we said nothing.

Directly after breakfast the doctor took us into the study and we began the morning's labours. It happened that, in working out a series of algebraic questions, De Cartienne and I used a great deal of paper, and when the doctor looked for a

piece to explain the working of a rather stiff quadratic, the rack was empty.

"Have either of you a piece of wastepaper in your pockets?" he asked. "The back of an envelope, or anything will do. I see it is lunch-time, so it is scarcely worth while sending for any."

I felt in all my pockets, but they were empty. De Cartienne drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it to the doctor. The moment he had parted with it, however, I saw him give a sudden start and he seemed as though about to make an effort to regain possession of it. But he was too late, for the doctor was already fast covering it with figures.

De Cartienne quitted his seat and stood looking over his shoulder, probably hoping that I should do the same. But I remained where I was, taking care to manifest my interest in the problem by asking frequent questions. The moment the doctor had finished his rapid figuring and solved the equation, I stretched out my hand for it eagerly.

"May I see it, sir?" I begged. "I fancy you've made a mistake in the values."

He handed it across the table at once, with a quiet smile.

"I think not, Morton," he said. "Examine it for yourself."

De Cartienne moved round to my side, with nervously twitching lips and an ugly light in his eyes.

"One moment, Morton," he said. "I won't keep it longer."

I laid a hand upon it, and pushed him back with the other.

"My turn first, please. Isn't that so, Dr. Randall?"

He nodded genially, not noticing the suppressed excitement in De Cartienne's manner.

"Certainly. I'm glad to find you both so interested in it. Let me know about this mistake at lunch-time, Morton," he added, smiling. "I'm going for a stroll round the garden now, and I should advise you to do the same. We've had a close morning's work."

He rose and left the room. De Cartienne watched the door close and then turned to me.

"Morton," he said quickly, "I want that envelope. There are some memoranda on the reverse side which concern my private affairs. I need not say more, I suppose."

"Keep your hands to yourself, De Cartienne!" I answered, shaking him off. "I shall not give you the envelope till I have examined it."

"You cad!" he hissed out, his voice shaking with fury. "How dare you attempt to pry into my private affairs? Give me the envelope, or I'll——"

"You'll what?" I answered, standing up, putting the envelope in my pocket and facing him. "Look here, De Cartienne, I'm not going to attempt to justify my conduct to you. On the face of it, it may seem to be taking a mean advantage, but I don't care a fig about that. I've made up my mind what to do, and all the blustering in the world won't make me alter it. I am going to look at the reverse side of this envelope. You——"

I ceased and with good reason, for, with a sudden, panther-like spring, he had thrown himself upon me, and his slender white fingers were grasping at my throat. It was a brief struggle, but a desperate one, for he clung to me with a strength which seemed altogether out of proportion to his slim body and long, thin arms.

I was in no mood for trifling, however, and, suddenly putting forth all my strength, I seized him by the middle, and sent him backwards, with

a crash of fallen furniture, into a corner of the room. Before he could recover himself, I drew out the envelope from my pocket and looked at it.

There was nothing on the reverse side but the address and the postmark. They were quite sufficient for me, however. The postmark was Mellborough and the handwriting was the peculiar, cramped handwriting of Mr. Marx.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FORESTALLED.

For a full minute neither of us moved. Then De Cartienne rose slowly to his feet and walked to the door.

"Here, take this!" I said, holding out the envelope towards him. "The private memoranda upon it may be useful to you."

He snatched it from my fingers and tore it into atoms. Then he walked quietly away, with an evil look upon his face.

At luncheon Cecil appeared, white as a ghost, and looking anxious and disturbed, as well he might. Dr. Randall was quite uneasy at his appearance, and acquiesced at once when I asked for permission to take him for a drive during the afternoon. De Cartienne sat silent throughout the meal, except for a few sympathising sentences to Cecil, and left the room at the first opportunity.

At three o'clock my dog cart was brought round and Cecil and I drove away. We scarcely spoke until we were in the streets of Drayton, and then, rousing myself, I bade him pluck his spirits up, and assured him vaguely that I would see him through it somehow. He thanked me, but seemed very despondent.

We went to the "Bull," and inquired for Mr.

Fothergill. He was in the coffee-room, we were told, and there we found him lunching.

"So good of you fellows to come and look me up!" he exclaimed, welcoming us cordially. "Waiter, a bottle of Pommery. Don't shake your head now, Lord Silchester. It'll do you good. I can see you're a bit seedy this morning."

Cecil smiled feebly.

"I'm not quite up to the mark," he admitted. "Just a bit of a headache—that's all. I say, Mr. Fothergill," he went on, plunging at once *in medias res*, "I'm awfully sorry, but I shan't be able to settle up with you to-day."

"Settle up with me!" repeated Mr. Fothergill, putting down his glass untasted, and looking surprised. "I don't understand you. Settle what up?"

"Why, the money I lost last night," Cecil explained.

Mr. Fothergill leaned back in his chair and looked into Cecil's white, anxious face with an astonishment which, if simulated, was certainly admirably done. Then he broke into a little laugh.

"My dear Lord Silchester," he said energetically, "you can't for one moment suppose that I expected anything of the sort. Why, I scarcely took our play seriously at all, and I should very much prefer that we said no more about it. Pray don't be offended," he added, hastily, for the sensitive colour had flushed into Cecil's cheeks. "I'll tell you how we'll arrange it. You shall give me your I O U's and pay them just as it is convenient. Any time within the next five or six years will do. But as to taking a sum like that from a b—a man who is not of age—why, it's absurd! I feel rather ashamed of myself for having been so fortunate."

A look of intense relief had stolen into Cecil's face, but the reaction was a little too sudden. He

left us abruptly and stood looking out of the window for a minute or two. Then he returned, smiling, and held out his hand to Mr. Fothergill.

"Mr. Fothergill, you're a brick!" he declared emphatically.

"Not another word, please!" Mr. Fothergill answered, smiling. "Now, look here, Lord Silchester," he added. "Drink this glass of wine."

Cecil obeyed him promptly.

"And now you'll be so good as to have some luncheon with me," Mr. Fothergill continued. "I don't care what you say. I don't believe you've eaten anything to-day. Waiter, bring me those other cutlets I ordered and the game-pie, and—yes, I think we might venture on another bottle of wine."

"Mr. Morton, you must join us. Clever animal of yours—that one outside," he rattled on lightly; "but I'd have her taken out for an hour, if I were you. It's too cold for her to be standing about. Shall I ring the ostler's bell and tell him? And then, if you will, you might drive me down to the station, when you're ready to go. My train leaves a little before five."

Whatever my former opinion of Mr. Fothergill had been, I felt bound to change it now. He was showing tact, good-nature, and a decidedly gentlemanly spirit. I had, in truth, eaten very little lunch at Borden Tower and Cecil none at all; and we proceeded to make good the omission.

When, an hour or two later, we left Mr. Fothergill at the station, we were both of one mind concerning him, and we had both promised to accept his cordial invitation to run up to town and see him before long.

On our way home Cecil stopped at the "Rose and Crown," and went in to make his peace with Milly. I promised to call for him and went on to the photo-

grapher's up the street. Mr. Lawrence appeared at once from a back-room, which, I presume, was the studio, wiping his hands upon a not particularly clean-looking towel.

I paid him in advance for a dozen photographs, promising to come in and have them taken next time I was in the town. Then I explained what was really the purport of my visit: Had he preserved the negative of the photograph which he had taken of Mr. Hart?

Certainly he had, he assured me. I told him about the date and his head and shoulders disappeared into a cupboard. In a few minutes he withdrew them and called out sharply for his assistant.

"Fenton," he exclaimed angrily, "you've been at this cupboard!"

Fenton, who was a tall, ungainly lad of most unprepossessing appearance, shook his head.

"I haven't been near it, sir!" he declared.

Mr. Lawrence looked incredulous.

"There is a negative missing!" he said sharply. "No one else could have meddled with it!"

"I don't know anything about it," the boy answered doggedly. "Perhaps it's upstairs."

Mr. Lawrence abandoned his search.

"If you'll excuse me a moment, sir," he said, "I'll have a look among the old ones."

I nodded and he closed the door and disappeared. Fenton would have gone, too, but I stopped him.

"Look here!" I said quickly; "see this?"

I held out a five-pound note.

He opened his eyes wide and looked at it longingly.

"Well, it's yours if you'll tell me what you've done with the negative of Mr. Hart's photograph. Quick!"

He hesitated.

"Should you split to the governor?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, then, I sold it for a sovereign to a young gentleman what inquired for it a few minutes ago. A thin, dark chap he is. I don't know his name, but I've seen him driving with you."

I threw him the note and left the place. I had now no doubt about the matter at all. De Cartienne had stolen the photograph of Mr. Hart from the "Rose and Crown," and had bought the negative. Why?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A GLEAM OF LIGHT.

After leaving the photographer's shop, I walked slowly across the little market-place and down the narrow street towards the "Rose and Crown." My recent discovery had given me a good deal to think about, or rather, had afforded me matter for a variety of wild conjectures, but I could follow none of them to a very satisfactory conclusion. I was like a man groping in the dark. I had stumbled upon several very extraordinary and inexplicable facts; but what connection, if any, they had with one another, or how to link them together, I could not tell.

I have always been somewhat absent-minded and, with my brain in such a whirl, it was not a very remarkable thing that I took a wrong turning. The moment I had discovered it I stopped short and looked round. I was in a little street that led past the back entrance of the "Rose and Crown." It was scarcely a public thoroughfare.

I had already turned on my heel to retrace my steps, when I saw two figures standing talking at the back door of the inn. One I knew at a glance to be Milly Hart. Her companion was standing

with his back to me, a muffler round his neck and his cap slouched over his eyes. In the gloom of the fast-falling twilight I did not at first recognise him; but when he turned round with a start at the sound of my approaching footsteps and withdrew his arm with a sudden movement from around his companion's waist, something in the motion and figure seemed familiar to me.

My approach seemed to discompose them not a little. Milly stepped back at once into the doorway and disappeared; her companion, without waiting to make any adieu, turned round and walked swiftly away. As he crossed the street to make use of the only exit from it—a narrow passage leading through a court — I had a better view of him. He kept his back to me as much as possible and seemed to be using every endeavour to escape recognition. But although I could not be quite certain, I was pretty sure that it was Leonard de Cartienne — de Cartienne, who never missed an opportunity of sneering at Milly's innocent blue eyes and baby face.

I turned back, and hurried round to the front entrance of the "Rose and Crown." In the parlour I found Cecil and Milly sitting very close together upon a sofa.

"Hallo, old chap, you haven't been long!" remarked Cecil, rising reluctantly.

"I should have been here before," I answered, looking steadily at Milly, "but I took a wrong turning and got round the back of this place somehow. Saw you, didn't I, Miss Milly?" I remarked.

She raised her eyebrows and looked at me wonderingly out of her placid blue eyes.

"Me? Oh, no! I have only just come down-

stairs, have I not, Cecil? It must have been one of the maids."

Milly and I exchanged a steady gaze, her eyes meeting mine without drooping and her manner betraying only a mild surprise. It was a revelation to me, a lesson which I did not easily forget.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm sure," I said, turning away. "It was rather dark and no doubt I was mistaken. Strange, too; I thought it was De Cartienne with whom you were talking."

Cecil laughed carelessly.

"My dear fellow, you must have been dreaming," he said; "De Cartienne has not been here at all."

"Ready, Cecil?" I asked, abandoning the subject. "I think we've kept Bess waiting about long enough."

"I'll come," he replied, drawing on his gloves. "I've scarcely had a moment with you, Milly, though, have I? No news?"

She shook her head sadly and the big tears stood in her eyes. There was no mistaking her earnestness now.

"None about my father. My uncle and aunt are coming to stay here. I expect them to-night."

"Horrid nuisance that is!" remarked Cecil, *sotto voce*. "Never mind, you won't be so lonely, little woman, will you? And you won't have so much to look after. I must take you for a drive as soon as we get a fine, clear day; that'll bring some colour into your cheeks. Good-bye!"

She came to the door and watched us drive off. Cecil took the reins and I climbed to his side, and, folding my arms, sat for a while in gloomy silence. Then suddenly a gleam of light, or what I hoped

might prove so, broke in upon me and I laid my hand upon Cecil's arm.

"Pull up, old chap—quick!" I exclaimed.

He did so, and looked at me wonderingly.

"Turn round and drive back again as fast as you can," I said, my voice trembling a little with excitement; "I want to ask Milly Hart a question."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DR. SCHOFIELD'S OPINION.

In ten minutes we were in the streets of Little Drayton again, and Cecil had brought the dog cart to a standstill outside the "Rose and Crown." He would have gone in with me, but I begged him not to. I jumped down and walked straight into the little parlour. Milly was sitting there alone, gazing absently into the fire. She looked up in surprise at my sudden entrance, and half rose.

"Milly, I want to ask you a question," I said, going up to her side. "It's about your father's disappearance."

"Yes!" she exclaimed eagerly. "What is it? Oh, do tell me quickly!"

"It's only an idea. Did Mr. Hart ever suffer from any brain disorder at any time? That's all I want to know. Has his mind always been quite strong?"

She did not answer for a moment and my heart beat fast. Looking at her closely, I could see that the colour had flushed into her cheeks and there was a troubled light in her eyes.

"He has had one or two severe illnesses," she admitted slowly; "brain fever once; and I'm afraid he used to drink too much now and then. The doctor told him that he must be very careful not to excite himself."

"Who was the doctor and where does he live?" I asked quickly.

"Dr. Schofield. He lives on the Lincoln Road, about a mile away. Why have you asked me this?" she added anxiously.

I evaded a direct reply.

"Never mind now," I said. "If anything comes of it, I will let you know."

She tried to detain me with further questions, but I hurried away and she did not follow me out of the door.

"Cis," I said, as I scrambled up to his side, "I want you to go home by the Lincoln Road and call at Dr. Schofield's. It isn't far out of the way."

He nodded.

"All right. You haven't found out anything about old Hart, have you? What was the question you went back to ask Milly?"

"Only about her father's health. No; I haven't found out anything. It's only an idea of mine I want to clear up."

Cecil looked as though he thought I might have told him what the idea was, but he said nothing. In a few minutes he pulled up outside a neat, red-brick house, which, as a shining brass plate indicated, was Dr. Schofield's abode.

The doctor was in and disengaged. He came at once into the waiting-room, where I had been shown—a respectable family practitioner, with intelligent face and courteous manner.

I explained my position as an acquaintance of Miss Hart's, interested in the mysterious disappearance of her father. It had occurred to me to make inquiries as to the state of his health, or, rather, his constitution, I added. Perhaps his prolonged absence might be accounted for by sudden and dangerous illness. Could Dr. Schofield give me any information?

His manner was encouraging. He bade me take a seat and went into the matter gravely.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I am rather surprised that I have not been appealed to before. In an ordinary case I should feel bound to maintain a strict secrecy with regard to the ailments of my patients, but this is different. As you have asked me this question, I feel bound to tell you what I would not otherwise divulge. Mr. Hart was my patient on two several occasions during the last two years for delirium tremens, and once within my recollection he had a distinct touch of brain fever."

"His mind would not be very strong, then?" I remarked.

Dr. Schofield hesitated.

"He had a wonderful constitution," he said slowly—"a constitution of iron. In ordinary circumstances I cannot bring myself to think that he could suddenly and completely have lost his reason. But supposing he had received some severe shock, such as a railway accident, or something of that sort, why, then it would be possible, even probable, he might become a raving lunatic in a moment."

"And would his madness be incurable?"

"If properly treated, with a knowledge of his past ailment—no," answered Dr. Schofield; "but if he were treated just like an ordinary madman in a pauper lunatic asylum, he would probably never recover. He would become worse and worse and finally be incurable. I see two objections to accepting any theory of this sort as accounting for his disappearance," the doctor continued, after a short pause. "In the first place the shock would have to be violent and unexpected, and this seems improbable; in the next place, he would surely have had some letter or something about him which would have led to his identification!"

"If the shock were the result of foul play, these would be destroyed," I suggested.

"Undoubtedly; but whence the foul play? Hart is known to have had only a few pounds with him when he left."

"Perhaps he had something in his keeping more valuable than money," I remarked.

"What?"

"A secret."

"Have you any grounds for such a belief?" the doctor asked curiously.

I hesitated. In my own mind I believed that I had; but for the present, at any rate, this was best kept to myself. I answered quite truthfully, however.

"I have made a few inquiries here and there," I said, "and I have heard it hinted that he had some secret means of replenishing his purse. He has been known more than once to leave here with only a few sovereigns in his pocket and to come back with his sovereigns turned into banknotes."

"I remember hearing some such tale," the doctor remarked. "I'm afraid it is all rather vague, though."

"I'm very much obliged to you, Dr. Schofield" I assured him, rising to take my leave.

He followed me to the door and then returned to his interrupted dinner. I mounted into the dog cart and we were soon bowling through the darkness towards Borden Tower.

"Get anything out of the old chap?" Cecil asked.

"Not much. I'm just a little wiser than I was before, that's all. Beastly sorry to keep you waiting so long!"

"Oh, that's all right! But I say, Phil," he added, "what is this idea of yours? You can tell me, can't you?"

"If it comes to anything, I will," I assured him. "But at present it is altogether too vague and you would only laugh at it. Don't ask me anything more about it yet, there's a good fellow."

"You're very close, all of a sudden," he grumbled. "Why can't you tell me?"

"Because I'm afraid of your letting it out to someone whom I don't want to know anything about it," I answered.

He laughed.

"Ah, well, perhaps you're right!" he said. "I couldn't keep anything back from Milly."

I echoed his laugh, but held my peace. It was not Milly alone from whom I wished my present idea to be kept a secret. In fact, I had not thought of Milly at all. I was only anxious that De Cartienne should remain altogether in the dark as to my clue; and for a remarkably good reason.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN INVITATION.

We drove straight into the courtyard, having no groom with us and entered the house from the back. As we passed the little room on the ground floor given up for our sole use as a repository for cricket-nets, fishing-tackle, guns, spare harness, and such like appliances, I opened the door, intending to hang my whip up. To my surprise De Cartienne was there in an old coat, with his sleeves turned up, cleaning a gun. He looked up and greeted us as we entered.

"What a time you men have been! What have you been up to in Little Drayton?"

"Oh, we had lunch with your friend Fothergill and shacked about," Cecil answered. "Tell you what, Len, he's a very decent fellow."

De Cartienne was examining the lock of his gun with great attention, and in the dusk I could not catch his expression.

"Oh, Fothergill's all right!" he answered. "You didn't find him very hungry for his winnings, did you?"

"I should think not," Cecil replied enthusiastically. "Why, I believe he was actually annoyed with himself for having won at all. I've given him my I O U's."

"He'll most likely tear them up," De Cartienne remarked. "He's beastly rich and he can't want the money."

"Where did you drop across him, Len?" asked Cecil, seating himself upon a chest and lighting a cigarette.

"He's a friend of my governor's. I've known him ever since I was a kid," De Cartienne answered slowly. "There, I think that'll do!" critically looking at the gleaming muzzle which he held in his hand.

"Why this sudden fit of industry?" inquired Cecil, yawning. "Going to do any shooting?"

De Cartienne nodded and began deliberately pulling the gun to pieces.

"Yes; I've had a long day indoors to-day and I mean to make up for it by potting some wild duck to-morrow. Hilliers told me that he'd heard of some very fair sport round by Rushey Ponds last week. You'd better come with me."

"Thanks, I'll see," Cecil answered. "I'm not very keen on wild duck potting."

"Haven't you been out all day, then, De Cartienne?" I asked—"not even to Drayton?"

"Not outside the house," he answered. "Do I look like it?"

He pointed to his slippered feet, his old clothes, and held up his hands, black with oil and grease. I took in the details of his appearance, feeling a little bewildered. It seemed barely possible that he could have been in Little Drayton an hour ago.

The dressing-bell rang out and we hurried off to our rooms, for Dr. Randall, easy-going enough in some things, was strictness itself with regard to our punctuality at dinner-time. But no sooner had I seen De Cartienne safely in his room than

I softly made my way downstairs again and crossed the yard to the stables.

It was as I had expected. The stall in which De Cartienne kept his mare was carefully closed, but through the chinks I could see that a lamp was burning inside.

I tried the door softly, but it was locked. Then I knocked. There was no answer. Turning away, I entered the next stall and, mounting a step-ladder, looked over the partition.

I saw very much what I had expected to see—De Cartienne's thoroughbred mare splashed all over with mud and still trembling with nervous fatigue, and by her side Dick, the stable-boy, holding a wet sponge in his hand and looking up at me with a scared, disconsolate expression.

"Oh, it be you, be it, Muster Morton?" he exclaimed rather sullenly.

I looked down at Diana.

"How came she in that exhausted condition?" I asked. "And why have you locked the door?"

Dick hesitated, and I tossed him a half-crown.

"The truth now, Dick," I said. "And I won't let Mr. de Cartienne know that I've seen her."

He brightened up at once and pocketed the half-crown.

"That's kind o' yer, sir!" he exclaimed, evidently much relieved. "All I know, sir, is that Muster de Cartienne he come in riding like mad along the Drayton Road 'bout 'arf an hour ago, and he says to me, 'Dick, take Diana, lock her up in the stable and don't let no one know as she's been out. Just attend to her yourself and rub her down carefully, for I've been obliged to ride fast.' And with that he guv me summut and hoff he went into the 'ouse."

"Thank you, Dick," I said, getting down from

the ladder, "that's all I wanted to know." And I crossed the yard to the house again and hurried upstairs to change my things.

We had two deliveries of letters at Borden Tower, and just as we were leaving the dinner-table that evening the late post arrived. There was a letter for me, a somewhat unusual occurrence, and a single glance at the arms and the bold, characteristic handwriting set me longing to open it, for it was from Mr. Ravenor. As soon as the cloth was cleared I did so.

"My dear Philip," it commenced, "I am thinking of travelling for several years, perhaps for longer, and should like to see you before I go. Come and stay here for a few days. I am writing Dr. Randall and also Cecil, who will accompany you. You will leave Borden Tower to-morrow and I will send to Mellborough to meet the 5.18. Bring some clothes, as there will be some people stopping here. —Yours,

"BERNARD RAVENOR."

I looked up from the letter with a great sense of relief and met Cecil's delighted gaze.

"Hurrah, old chap!" he exclaimed, only half under his breath. "Won't we have a rare old time?"

"Cave!" I whispered, for the doctor was looking our way.

"More vacation," he remarked, in a grumbling tone, which was made up for, however, by a good-natured smile. "Upon my word, I don't know how Mr. Ravenor imagines you're ever going to learn anything! However, I suppose you must go."

De Cartienne looked up inquiringly.

"We're going to stay at Ravenor Castle for a week," Cecil explained, "We're off to-morrow."

I leaned forward and watched De Cartienne's face intently. There was an expression in it which I could not analyse. It might have been pleasure, or apprehension, or indifference. Though I watched him narrowly, I could not make up my mind whether he was more dismayed or gratified at the prospect of our visit.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A METAMORPHOSIS.

It seemed almost as though some magical metamorphosis had taken place within the walls of Ravenor Castle. Directly we came in sight of it we had the first intimation of its altered aspect. Instead of the one or two solitary lights shining above the dark woods, it seemed a very blaze of illumination, and when we drew up at the great front door the change was still more apparent. Liveried servants with powdered hair were moving about the hall. From open doors there came the sound of laughing voices, and even Mr. Ravenor's manner, as he came out to meet us, seemed altered.

"Come in and have some tea here," he said, leading the way to one of the smaller rooms. "Your mother is here, Cecil."

We followed him into Lady Silchester's favourite apartment. Several ladies and one or two men were lounging on divans and in easy chairs around a brightly-blazing fire. Lady Silchester, who was presiding at a green-and-gold Sèvres tea-service, welcomed us both with a languid smile.

"My dear Cis, how you have grown!" she said, leaning back in her chair and leisurely sipping her tea. "I declare I had no idea that I had a son your height, sir! Had you, Lord Penraven?"

Lord Penraven, who was lounging by her side, with his elbow upon the mantelpiece, stroked a long, fair moustache vigorously and answered with emphasis:

"'Pon my word, I hadn't the slightest idea! Seems almost impossible!"

"Let me give you boys some tea!" Lady Silchester said, in her sweetest tone.

"None for me, thanks, mother," replied Cecil. "Why, Ag—Miss Hamilton, is that really you over in the corner?" he exclaimed, rising and crossing the room. "How awfully jolly!"

Lady Silchester shrugged her shoulders and turned to me.

"Mr. Morton?"

I took the cup which she had filled and the conversation which our entrance had interrupted flowed on again. Presently Mr. Ravenor, who had been standing on the hearthrug talking to a stately, grey-haired lady who occupied the seat of honour—a black oak arm-chair drawn up to the fire,—moved over to my side and dropped into a vacant seat between Lady Silchester and myself.

"Well, Philip," he said softly, "you seem lost in thought. Are you wondering whether a magician's wand has touched Ravenor Castle?"

"It all seems very different," I answered.

"Of course. Nothing like change, you know. It is only by comparison that we can appreciate. Stagnation sharpens one's appetite for gaiety, and one must go through a course of overwork before one can taste the full sweetness of an idle country life."

Then Mr. Ravenor was silent for a minute, leaning back in his chair and looking steadily into the fire, and by the dancing, fitful light of the flames I could see that the old weariness and deep in-

definable sadness had stolen into his pale face and dark eyes. It was only a passing change. The sound of the laughing voices around seemed suddenly to galvanise him into consciousness of the *rôle* which he was playing and the expression faded away. Someone asked him a question and he answered it with a light jest. Once more he was the courteous, smiling host, whose sole thought appeared to be the entertainment of his guests. But I knew that there was a background.

The dressing-bell rang and the gossiping assembly broke up. Mr. Ravenor, standing with the opened door in his hand, exchanged little happy speeches with most of the ladies as they swept out. When they were all gone he turned to Cecil and me and looked at us critically, with a faint smile upon his lips.

"Well, are you ready for your matric., Cecil?" he asked.

Cecil made a wry face.

"Shall be soon, uncle!" he declared hopefully. "I'm getting on now first rate. Morton here makes me work like a Trojan."

"That's right! And you, Philip? I hope my lazy nephew doesn't keep you back."

"Oh, Morton's all right for his matric. whenever he likes to go in for it!" broke in Cecil.

Mr. Ravenor nodded.

"Good! You'd better go and dress now, both of you; Richards is waiting to show you your rooms."

We passed up the great oak staircase, and on the first corridor we came face to face with a slim little figure in a white frock, walking demurely by the side of her maid, with her ruddy, golden hair tumbled about her oval face and an expectant light in her dancing blue eyes.

Directly she saw us she flew into Cecil's arms.

"Oh, Cis, Cis, Cis, how delightful! How glad I am that you have come! They only just told me! And how do you do, Mr. Morton?"

She held out a very diminutive palm and looked up at me with a beaming smile.

"I'm quite well, thank you, Lady Beatrice," I answered, looking down with keen pleasure into her sweet, childish face, and repressing a strong desire to take her up in my arms, as Cecil had done, and give her a kiss.

"You remember me, then?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered; "I remember you quite well! Your name is Philip, isn't it? You told me that I might call you by it."

"Well, we must go now, dear," Cecil said, stroking her hair. "We've got to dress for dinner, you know."

"Oh!" The exclamation was drawn out and the little face fell. Suddenly it brightened.

"Cecil, what do you think? I've got a pony, a real pony of my own. Will you come for a ride with me to-morrow? Please, please, do!"

"All right!" he promised carelessly.

She clapped her hands and looked up at me.

"Will you come too, Philip?" she asked.

"I should like to very much indeed," I answered unhesitatingly.

"Oh, that's delightful!" she exclaimed gleefully. "We will have such a nice ride! You shall see Queenie canter; she does go so fast! Good-bye now!"

She tripped away by the side of her maid, turning round more than once to wave her hand to us. Then we hurried along to our rooms, which were at the end of the wide, marble-pillared corridor and opened one into the other. Our portmanteaux had been placed in readiness, so dressing was not a tedious business. I had finished first and lounged

in an easy chair, watching Cecil struggle with a refractory white tie.

"How pretty your sister is, Cis!" I remarked.

"Think so? She's rather an odd little thing," declared her brother, absently surveying himself at last with satisfaction in the long pier-glass. "Didn't know you'd ever seen her before. I say" —with sudden emphasis—"isn't Aggie Hamilton a jolly good-looking girl?"

"I've scarcely seen her yet," I reminded him. "Rather a chatterbox, isn't she?"

"Chatterbox? Not she!" Cecil protested indignantly. "Why——"

The rumble of a gong reached us from below. Cecil stopped short in his speech and hurried me out of the room.

"Come along, sharp!" he exclaimed. "That means dinner in ten minutes, and I promised to get down into the drawing-room first and introduce you to Aggie. Come on!"

We descended into the hall and a tall footman threw open the door of the long suite of drawing and ante-rooms in which the guests at the Castle were rapidly assembling. To me, who had seen nothing of the sort before, it was a brilliant sight. Four rooms, all of stately dimensions and all draped with amber satin of the same shade, were thrown into one by the upraising of heavy, clinging curtains, and each one seemed filled with groups of charmingly-dressed women and little knots of men. A low, incessant buzz of conversation floated about in the air, which was laden with the scent of exotics and dainty perfumes. The light was brilliant, but soft, for the marble figures around the walls held out silver lamps covered with gauzy rose-coloured shades.

We passed through two of the rooms before we found the young lady of whom Cecil was in search.

Then we came upon her suddenly, sitting quite alone and idly turning over the pages of a book of engravings. Cecil jogged me excitedly with his elbow in a manner which elsewhere would have brought down anathemas and possibly retribution upon his head. As it was, however, I had to bear the pain like a Spartan.

"I say, isn't she stunning?" he whispered.

I answered in the affirmative, carefully removing myself from the range of his elbow. Then we approached her, and she closed the book of engravings with a comical air of relief and made room for us beside her.

She was even prettier than I had expected, with dark hair and eyes, dazzling complexion, a perfect figure of the *petite* order, and faultless teeth, which she was by no means averse from showing. She wore a black lace gown, with a good deal of scarlet about it and a deep red rose in her bosom. Altogether, I was scarcely surprised at Cecil's captivation.

If not actually a chatterbox, she was certainly possessed of the art of talking nonsense very volubly, and making others talk it. Before dinner was announced by a dignified-looking functionary we had got through quite an amazing amount of conversation. It fell to Cecil's lot to take in his inamorata, whilst I was far away behind with the middle-aged wife of a country clergyman. She was very pleasant, though, and I was quite content to do but little talking throughout the long banquet, for it was all new to me and interesting.

The vast dining-hall—it was really the picture-gallery—the many servants in rich liveries, the emblazoned plate, the glittering glasses, and the brilliant snatches of conversation which floated around me, all were a revelation. Very soon the effect of it passed away and I was able to choose

my wines and select my dishes, and was free to take part if I chose in the talk. But for that first evening I was content to remain silent and, as far as possible, unnoticed.

Dinner, which had seemed to me to be growing interminable, came to an end at last. Lady Silchester, at the head of a long file of stately women, swept down the polished floor, and the procession departed with much rustling of robes. Some of the vacant chairs were taken possession of by men, and already delicate blue clouds of smoke were curling upwards to the vaulted ceiling. It was the short period dearer to the heart of man than any during the day. Every one stretched out his stiff limbs, filled his glass and assumed his favourite attitude. Voices were raised and a sudden change of tone crept in upon the conversation. Only Mr. Ravenor and a few of the older guests appeared to be still engrossed in the discussion of some abstruse scientific controversy then raging in the reviews. Everyone else seemed to be talking lightly of the day's sport, the arrangements for the morrow, and his own and other men's horses.

It was getting a little slow for me. Cecil had found some friends, and the sound of his hearty boyish laugh came to me often from the other end of the table. My immediate neighbours were a bishop, who was deep in discussion with a minor canon concerning the doings of some recent diocesan conference, at which things seemed to have been more lively than harmonious; and on my other side Lord Penraven was quarrelling with the lord lieutenant of the county about the pedigree of a racehorse. Both disputes were utterly without interest to me, and it was no small relief when, as I caught Mr. Ravenor's eye, he beckoned me to a vacant chair by his side.

The conversation, which had been for a moment interrupted, was soon renewed. I sat silent, listening with ever-increasing admiration to the play of words, the subtle arguments, and the epigrammatic brilliancy of expression which flashed from one to another of the four disputants. Had I known anything of the social or literary life of London I might have been less astonished, for Mr. Ravenor and two of his antagonists, Mr. Justice Haselton and Professor Clumbers, were reckoned among the finest talkers of their day.

At last Mr. Ravenor, very much to my regret, brought the conversation to an abrupt close by proposing an exodus to the drawing-rooms. A few of the younger men looked eager to depart, but the majority rose and stretched themselves with the sad faces of martyrs before forming themselves into little groups and quitting the room. Mr. Ravenor remained until the last and motioned me to stay with him.

"Well, Philip," he said, when everyone had gone, "how are you getting on at Dr. Randall's? Do you like being there?"

"Very much for some things," I answered.

He looked at me closely.

"There is something you have to tell me," he said. "What is it?"

I glanced around at the little army of servants moving noiselessly about on all sides.

"There is something," I acknowledged, "but I would rather tell it you when we are quite alone. Besides, it is rather a long story. It has mostly to do with Mr. Marx."

The calm, stately serenity of Mr. Ravenor's face underwent a sudden change. His dark brows almost met into his eyes, which I could not read. The change strengthened the impression which had lately been growing upon me. There was

some deep mystery connected with the personality of Mr. Marx in which Mr. Ravenor was somehow concerned.

"What about Mr. Marx? What can you have to say to me about him?" he asked coldly.

"More than I should care to say here," I answered, glancing around. "It is rather a long——"

"Come into the library to me the last thing to-night," he said quickly. "I must know what this story is that you have got hold of. We will go into the drawing-room now."

In a few moments the cloud had vanished from his face and he was again the polished host. And I, under protest, was inveigled into a corner by Miss Agnes Hamilton, and given my first lesson in the fashionable art of flirting.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MR. MARX IS WANTED.

It was long past midnight before the last little knots of guests had wished one another good night, and even then Lord Penraven and a few chosen companions only adjourned to a smaller smoking-room in the back regions of the Castle. I knew that Mr. Ravenor was not with them, however, for I had seen him, after having outstayed all save this handful of his guests, cross the hall and enter the library. In about half an hour I followed him.

I had expected to find him resting after the great strain which the multitude and importance of his guests must have imposed upon him during the day. But I found him very differently employed. He was bending low over his writing-table, with a cup of tea by his side, and already several sheets of closely-written foolscap were scattered about the table. At the sound of my entrance he looked up at once and laid down his pen.

"Sit there," he said, pointing to an easy-chair opposite to him. "I want to see your face while you are talking. Now, what is this tale which you have to tell me?"

His manner was far from encouraging and his

face wore a severe expression. Altogether I felt a little nervous. But it had to be done, so I began.

First I told him all about Leonard de Cartienne, his bad influence over Cecil, and his correspondence with Mr. Marx. He listened without remark. Then I paused to take breath.

"I don't know what you'll say about the rest of my story," I went on. "I scarcely know what to think of it myself. But here it is. There is an inn in Little Drayton kept by a man named Hart, and Cecil and De Cartienne go there—sometimes. About a month before I went to Borden Tower the man Hart disappeared. He left home on a journey, the nature of which he kept secret even from his daughter, and has never returned or been heard of. All the information which his daughter can give is that he has left home before on a similar errand and invariably returned with money after three or four days."

I paused and glanced at Mr. Ravenor. He was looking a little puzzled, but not particularly interested.

"About a month before I left here for Borden Tower," I went on, "I met Mr. Marx in Torchester and drove home with him late at night. On the moor we were furiously attacked by a man who seemed to be mad and Mr. Marx was slightly injured. Two days afterwards Mr. Marx was assaulted by the same man in the park, and if I had not turned up he would probably have been killed. The man was a lunatic in every respect, save one. He recognized Mr. Marx as his enemy and made deliberate attempts upon his life."

Mr. Ravenor softly pulled down the green lampshade on the side nearest to him, and in the subdued light I could scarcely see his face, but I felt that his interest in my story was growing.

"Well, of course, when Cecil began talking about this man Hart's disappearance," I continued, "and I heard a good deal about it at Little Drayton, I began to think about this lunatic whom no one knew anything about. I put down the exact dates, and I found that Hart must have left Little Drayton about a week before the first attack on Mr. Marx by the unknown madman. Of course, this by itself was scarcely worth thinking about, but the strangest part of it is to come. More out of curiosity than anything, I asked to see a photograph of Mr. Hart. His daughter took us into the sitting-room to look at one and to her amazement found it gone. All search was unavailing. Someone had taken it away. Well, I found out where it had been taken and went to order a copy. It was no use. The negative had been sold to the same person who alone could have entered Miss Hart's sitting-room and abstracted the photograph. That person was Leonard de Cartienne, and he has been in communication with Mr. Marx, the man whom the lunatic tried to murder. Can you make anything of that, sir?"

Apparently Mr. Ravenor had made something of it. He was leaning a little forward in his chair and at the sight of his face a great fear came upon me.

A ghastly change had crept into it. His eyes were burning with a dry, fierce fire, and the pallor extended even to his lips.

He sat forward, with his long, wasted fingers, stretched out convulsively before his face, like a man who sees a hideous vision pass before his sight and yet remains spellbound, powerless to speak, or move, or break away from the loathsome spectacle.

Sickly beads of perspiration stood out upon his clammy forehead and his dry lips were moving, although no sound came from them.

I gazed at him in a speechless horror, and as I looked the room and all its contents seemed to swim around me. What could Mr. Ravenor have found so awful in the story which I had told and how could it concern him?

Suddenly he rose from his seat and stood over me. I was more than ever alarmed at his strange expression.

"There is a third connection," he said hoarsely. "Do you remember that a man called to see me, whom I declined to admit, on the night of your first visit here? When I changed my mind he had disappeared."

I gave a little cry and felt my blood run cold.

"Mr. Marx had something to do with that," I faltered out. "I met him under the trees in the avenue and he was horribly frightened to see me. I had heard a cry. I was listening."

Mr. Ravenor stretched out his hand to the bell and rang it violently. We sat in silence, dreading almost to look at one another until it was answered.

"Go to Mr. Marx's room and bid him come here at once," Mr. Ravenor commanded.

The man bowed and withdrew. When he reappeared he carried in his hand a letter.

"Mr. Marx left this on his desk for you, sir," he said.

"Left it! Where is he? Is he not in the Castle?" questioned Mr. Ravenor sharply.

"No, sir. He had a dog cart about half-past four to catch the London express at Mellborough."

Mr. Ravenor tore open the note and then threw it across to me. There were only a few words:

"Dear Mr. Ravenor,—Kindly excuse me for a day or two. Important business of a private nature calls me hurriedly to London. If you

are writing me, my address will be at the *Hotel Metropole*. M."

There was a silence between us. Then I looked into Mr. Ravenor's colourless face.

"We must find that lunatic," I whispered

Mr. Ravenor turned from me with a shudder.

"We must do nothing of the sort."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

I ACCEPT A MISSION.

THERE was a silence which threatened to last for ever.

At length Mr. Ravenor turned his head slightly and looked towards me. The eagerness which he saw in my face seemed to strike some grim vein of humour in him, for his lips parted in a dreary, fleeting smile.

"Are you expecting to hear a confession?" he asked, as it passed away.

A confession from him! God forbid! From him who had ever seemed to me so far above other men, that none other were worthy to be classed with him! All the old fire of my boyish hero-worship blazed up at the very thought. A confession from him! The bare idea was sacrilegious.

He read his answer in the mute, amazed protest of my looks, and did not wait for the words which were trembling upon my lips.

"It would do you little good to tell you all that your story has suggested to me," he said quietly. "Some day you will know everything; but not yet—not yet."

He paused and walked slowly up and down the room, with his hands behind him and his eyes fixed upon the floor. Suddenly he stopped and looked up.

"Marx must come back at once," he said, with something of his old firmness. "I shall send him a telegram to-morrow to return immediately."

"And if he doesn't come?"

"I must go to him. This matter must be cleared up as far as it can be and at once."

"Your guests," I reminded him. "How can you leave them?"

"I forgot them," he exclaimed impatiently. "Philip, will you go?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," I answered quietly, although my heart was beating fast. "Yes, I will go. Perhaps it would be best."

He let his hand rest for a moment upon my shoulder, and, though he did not say so, I knew that he was pleased. Then he glanced at the clock.

"Two o'clock!" he exclaimed. "Philip, you must leave me now."

I looked towards his writing-table, at which he was already seating himself, and hesitated.

"You are not going to write now?" I ventured to protest.

"Why not?"

I pointed to the clock; but he only smiled.

"I am no slave to regular hours," he said quietly. "An hour or two's sleep is enough for me at a time."

So I left him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MY RIDE.

It was a few minutes past nine when I descended into the long, oaken gallery where breakfast was served, and at the head of the principal table sat Mr. Ravenor in hunting costume. Everyone who was down was evidently bound for the meet. The men were nearly all in scarlet coats, and the women in riding-habits and trim little hats, with their veils pushed back. There was a great clatter of knives and forks, and a good deal of carving going on at the long, polished sideboard, and above it all, a loud hum of cheerful talk; altogether it was a very pleasant meal that was in progress.

I was making my way towards a gap in the table at the lower end when I heard my name called, and looked down into Miss Hamilton's piquant, upturned face.

"Come and sit by me," she exclaimed, moving her skirts to make room. "See, I've hidden a chair here—for somebody."

I took it with a laugh.

"Well, as somebody is so very lazy this morning," I said, "he doesn't deserve to have it; so I will. Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head.

"No, thanks. Look after yourself, do, for we shall have to start presently. And now tell me,

how did you know for whom I was saving that chair ? "

"Well, I supposed it was for Cis," I remarked, making a vigorous attack upon an adjacent ham.

"Indeed ! And supposing I were to say that it wasn't—that it was for someone else ? "

"Poor Cis ! " I said, with a sigh. "Don't tell me who the someone else was, Miss Hamilton, please."

"Why not ? "

"Because I shall hate him."

"For Lord Silchester's sake ? "

"No ; for my own."

"Mr. Morton, you're talking nonsense."

"Well, didn't you undertake to teach me how last evening ? "

"Teach you ! Oh ! "—a little ironically—"you're a very apt pupil, Mr. Morton."

I looked at her in mute remonstrance.

"With such a tutor, Miss Hamilton——"

She stopped me, laughing.

"Oh, you're a dreadful boy ! Let me give you some tea to keep you quiet."

I drew a long sigh and attacked my breakfast vigorously. Presently she began again.

"Do you know Nanpantan, Mr. Morton, where the meet is this morning ? "

"Very well," I answered, cutting myself some more ham. "Do you mind giving me another cup of tea, Miss Hamilton ? It was so good ! "

She nodded and drew off her thick dogskin glove again.

"You thirsty mortal ! " she remarked. "I'm afraid you must have been smoking too much last night."

"One cigarette," I assured her. "No more, upon my honour."

"Really ! Then you won't get any more tea

from me to unsteady your nerves. Now tell me, Mr. Morton, do you know this country?"

"Every inch of it. No one better."

"Oh, how nice! And you'll give me a lead today, won't you? I do so want to do well."

"I should be delighted," I answered; "but, unfortunately, I'm not going to hunt."

"Not going to hunt! Then what are you going to do, pray?"

"Going for a ride with a young lady," I answered.

"Oh, indeed!"—with a toss of the head.

There was a short silence. Then curiosity conquered the fit of indignation which Miss Hamilton had thought well to assume.

"May I ask the name of the fortunate young lady?"

"You may," I answered calmly, helping myself to toast. "It is little Lady Beatrice."

She burst into a peal of laughter, but stopped suddenly.

"What nonsense! Are you going to take the groom's place, then, and hold the leading-rein?"

"If she rides with one, very likely," I answered.

There was a short silence. Then Miss Hamilton returned to the charge.

"How old is your inamorata?" she inquired. "Seven or eight?"

"Twelve next birthday," I answered promptly.

"It's quite too ridiculous!" she declared, tossing her head. "I really wanted you to come with me this morning, because you know the country," she added, with a sidelong glance from her dark eyes.

"Nothing would have given me greater pleasure," I declared; "but a promise is a promise, you know, and we made this one before we knew anything about the meet."

"We! Who are we?" she asked quickly.

"Cis and I."

"Cecil won't go if I ask him to come with me," she said confidently.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Perhaps not. The more reason why I should."

She turned away from me half amused, half vexed. Just then Cecil appeared, and she beckoned him eagerly to her side.

"Cecil, Mr. Morton tells me that you have promised to ride with Beatrice this morning," she said.

"So we did," he exclaimed. "Awfully sorry to disappoint her, but, of course, I didn't know anything about the meet."

"Oh, I am glad that you are not going to desert me, then," she said, laughing. "Mr. Morton declares that he is going to keep his engagement."

"Very good of him, if he is," remarked Cecil, stirring his tea with great cheerfulness.

"Don't pity me," I said, rising. "I'm sure I shall enjoy it. *Au revoir*, Miss Hamilton."

And I did enjoy it. Many a time afterwards I thought of that slim little figure in the long riding-habit, her golden hair streaming in the breeze, and her dainty, flushed face aglow with excitement and delight, and of the pleasant prattle which her little ladyship poured into my willing ears. I remembered, too, her quaint, naïve ways, and the grave way in which she thanked me for taking care of her —little mannerisms which soon yielded to familiarity and vanished altogether. And, strange though it may seem, I found always more satisfaction in recalling these things than the winged look and merry speeches of Miss Agnes Hamilton.

CHAPTER XL.

MY MISSION.

For the first time in my life I was in London—and alone. There had been no reply from Mr. Marx to the telegrams commanding his instant return, and so on the third morning after my arrival at Ravenor Castle I quitted it again to go in search of him. Accustomed though he was to conceal his feelings, and admirably though he succeeded in doing so in the presence of his guests, I could see that Mr. Ravenor was deeply anxious to have the suspicions which my story had awakened either dispelled or confirmed. Nor, indeed, although their purport was scarcely so clear to me, was I less so.

I suppose that no one, especially if he had never before been in a great city, could pass across London for the first time without some emotion of wonder. To me it was like entering an unknown world. The vast throng of people, the ceaseless din of traffic, and the huge buildings, all filled me with amazement which, as we drove through the Strand to Northumberland Avenue, grew into bewilderment. Only the recollection of my mission and its grave import recalled me to myself as the cab drew up before the Hotel Metropole.

My bag was taken possession of at once by one of the hall-porters and I engaged a room. Then I made inquiries about Mr. Marx.

The clerk turned over two or three pages of the ledger and shook his head. There was no one of that name stopping in the hotel, he informed me.

"Can you tell me whether anyone of that name has been staying here during the last week?" I asked.

He made a further search and shook his head.

"We have not had the name of Marx upon our books at all, sir, during my recollection," he declared. "Quite an uncommon name, too; I should certainly have remembered it."

"There have been letters addressed to him here by that name," I said; "can you tell me what has become of them?"

He shook his head.

"That would not be in my department, sir; you will ascertain by inquiring at the head-porter's bureau round the corner."

I thanked him and made my way thither across the reception hall. The answer to my question was given at once.

"There are letters for a Mr. Marx nearly every morning, sir, and telegrams," said the official; "but I don't think that Mr. Marx himself is stopping at the hotel; another gentleman always applies for them and sends them on."

"And is the other gentleman staying here?" I asked.

"Yes, sir; No. 110."

"Has he any authority to receive them from Mr. Marx?" I inquired.

"I believe so. He showed us a note from Mr. Marx, asking him to receive and forward them, and he has to sign, too, for every one he receives. It is a rule with us that anyone receiving letters not addressed to himself should do so, whether he has authority or not."

"Can you tell me his name?" I asked. "I am sorry to give you so much trouble, but I particularly wish to ascertain Mr. Marx's whereabouts, and this gentleman knows it."

"Certainly, sir. John, what is No. 110's name?" he asked an assistant.

"Count de Cartienne," was the prompt reply.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE COUNT DE CARTIENNE.

My surprise at this last piece of information could not pass unnoticed. Both the hall-porter and his assistant were evidently well-trained servants, but they looked curiously at me and then exchanged rapid glances with one another. I recovered myself, however, in an instant.

"This Count de Cartienne," I asked, "is he young? I think I know him. Rather dark and thin and short? Is that he?"

The man shook his head.

"No, sir. Count de Cartienne is a tall, aristocratic-looking gentleman, middle-aged. You are certain to see him about the hotel. He is in and out a great deal."

I thanked him and moved away, for the people were beginning to flock in, inquiring for their keys. As it was nearly dinner-time, I followed their example and went to my room to change my travelling clothes for more conventional attire.

The lift was almost full when I entered it; but as we were on the point of starting, a lady, followed by an elderly gentleman, stepped in. I rose at once, being nearest the gate, to offer my seat, but the words which I had intended to speak died away upon my lips.

Something in the graceful figure, the soft, sweet

eyes, and the delicately-cut features, seemed to remind me of my mother. It was a faint resemblance, perhaps—scarcely more than a suggestion—but it was still enough to make my heart beat fast, and to arrest for a moment my recollection of where I was. Then suddenly I remembered that I was behaving, to say the least of it, strangely, and I turned abruptly away.

At the third floor I stepped out and walked across the corridor to my room without glancing once behind. But it was some time before I unpacked my portmanteau, or even thought of dressing. Then I remembered that if they were dining at the hotel I should see them again, and, turning out my clothes at once, I dressed with feverish haste. For the moment I had forgotten all about Count de Cartienne, forgotten even the very purpose of my visit to London. Only one face, linked with a memory, dwelt in my mind and usurped all my thoughts. I felt a strange excitability stealing through my frame, and the fingers which sought to fasten my tie shook so that they failed in their duty. I seemed to have stepped into another state of being.

When I descended into the dining-room it was already almost full, and there were very few empty tables. For a minute or two I stood behind the entrance screen, looking around. Nowhere could I see any sign of the lady whose face had so interested me. Either she was dining away from the hotel or had not yet put in an appearance. Hoping devoutly that the latter was the case, I took possession of a small table laid for three facing the door and ordered my dinner.

I had scarcely finished my soup before an instinctive consciousness that I was being watched made me look quickly up. Standing just inside the room, calmly surveying the assembled guests, and myself in particular, was a tall, distinguished-looking

man, perfectly clean-shaven, rather fair than otherwise, with a single eye-glass stuck in his eye, through which he was coolly examining me. He carried an Inverness cape and an opera-hat, and his evening clothes, which fitted him perfectly, were in the best possible taste, even down to the plain gold stud in his shirt front. His age might have been anything from thirty to fifty, for his carriage was perfectly upright, and his hair only slightly streaked with grey. Altogether his appearance was that of a well-turned-out, well-bred man, and as I glanced away I felt a little mild curiosity to know who he was.

He came a few steps farther into the room, and after a moment's hesitation passed by a larger table laid for six and took the vacant seat at mine. He wished me good-evening in a clear, pleasant voice, with a slight foreign accent, resigned his coat and hat to a more than ordinarily attentive waiter, and drawing a card from his pocket began deliberately to write out his dishes from the menu. Then he shut up his pencil, and leaning back in his chair once more glanced round at the roomful of people. Having apparently satisfied his curiosity, he yawned, and turning towards me, began to talk.

Soon I began to feel myself quite at home with him, and to enjoy my dinner with a greatly-added zest. Indeed, in listening to some of his quaint recitals of adventures at foreign hotels, I almost forgot to watch for the advent of the lady and gentleman for whom I had been looking out so eagerly only a few minutes before.

As it happened, however, I saw them enter, and my attention immediately wandered from the story which my companion was telling.

Something in the fragility of her appearance, and the weight with which she leaned upon her husband's arm, seemed to mark her as an invalid, and this

expression was in a measure heightened by her black lace dress, which, combined with the too perfect complexion and slight figure, gave to her face an almost ethereal expression. As I looked into the deep blue eyes I seemed again to be able to trace that vague likeness to my mother, and I felt my heart beat fast as the impression grew upon me. It was only when my new friend stopped abruptly in his anecdote and looked at me questioningly, that I could withdraw my eyes from her.

"Are they friends of yours who have just come in?" he asked, without turning round.

"No; I never saw them before this afternoon in my life. I wonder if you could tell me who they are?"

He moved his chair a little, so as to be able to do so without rudeness, and looked round. I happened to be watching him, and I saw at once that he recognised them.

Strange to say, the recognition seemed to afford him anything but pleasure; a change passed over his face like a flash of lightning, and although I only just caught it, it made me feel for the moment decidedly uncomfortable. While it lasted the face had not been a pleasant one to look upon. But it was not that alone which troubled me. During the moment that his expression had been transformed, it had given me an odd, disagreeable sense of familiarity.

He was himself again almost immediately—so soon that I could scarcely credit the change—and more than once afterwards I felt inclined to put that evil look and lowering brow down to a trick of my imagination. Even when I had decided to do so, however, I caught myself wondering more than once of whom they had reminded me.

He moved his chair again and went on with his dinner in silence.

"You recognised them?" I ventured to remark.

"Yes," he answered curtly.

"Would you mind telling me who they are, then?" I persisted. "I feel interested in them."

He looked up curiously and kept his eyes fixed on me while he answered my question.

"The man is Lord Langerdale, an Irish peer, and the lady with him is his wife."

"Thank you. The lady's face reminded me of someone I knew once."

He removed his eyes and his tone grew lighter.

"Indeed! Rather an uncommon type of face, too. She's a lovely woman still, though she looks delicate."

I assented silently. Somehow I did not care to discuss her with this stranger.

"Perhaps you noticed," he went on, after a short pause, "that it was rather a shock to me to see them here?"

"Yes, I did notice that," I admitted.

He sighed and looked grave for a moment. Then he poured himself out a glass of champagne and drank it deliberately off.

"It was purely a matter of association," he said, in a low tone. "A somewhat painful incident in my life was connected with that family, although with no present member of it. Pass the bottle, and let us change the subject."

We talked of other things, and for a time all my former interest in his piquant anecdotes and trenchant remarks was renewed. But while he was gravely considering with a waiter the relative merits of two brands of claret, I found my eyes wandering to the table at our right, in search of the woman whose face had so attracted me. This time my eyes met hers.

Then a strange thing happened. Instead of looking away at once, she kept her eyes steadily

fixed upon me and suddenly gave a distinct start. I saw the colour rush into her face and leave it again almost as swiftly; her thin lips were slightly parted, and her whole expression was one of great agitation. I tried to look away, but I could not; I felt somehow forced to return her steady gaze. But when she turned to her husband and touched him on the arm, evidently to direct his attention to me, the spell was broken, and I moved my chair slightly, making some casual remark to my companion which was sufficient to set the ball of conversation rolling again. But one stolen glance a few moments later showed me that both husband and wife were regarding me attentively, and several times afterwards, when I looked over towards their table, I met Lady Langerdale's eyes, full of a sad, wistful, and withal puzzled expression which I could not read.

As dinner drew towards a close it occurred to me that my *vis-à-vis* had studiously avoided turning once towards our neighbours. If he desired to escape recognition, however, he was unsuccessful, for just as we were beginning to think of quitting our places, Lord Langerdale left his seat to speak to some acquaintances at the other end of the room, and on his way back he looked straight into my companion's face. He started slightly, hesitated, and then came slowly up to our table.

"Eugène!" he exclaimed. "By all that's wonderful, is it really you? Why, we heard that you had become an Oriental, and forsworn the ways and haunts of civilisation."

He spoke lightly, but it was easy to see that the meeting was a very embarrassing one for both of them.

"I have not been in England long," was the quiet reply. "Lady Langerdale, I am glad to see, is well."

"She is fairly well. How strange that we should meet here! Why, it must be twenty years since I have seen you."

"I have spent but little time in England."

"I suppose not," Lord Langerdale answered slowly. "We have heard of you occasionally. Will you come and speak to my wife?"

"I think not," was the calm reply. "It could only be very painful for both of us. If Lady Langerdale desires it—not unless—I will call upon you at your rooms. But, frankly, I would rather not."

Lord Langerdale appeared by no means offended, rather a little relieved, and answered sadly:

"It is for you to choose. If you can tell her that the past has lost some of its bitterness for you, and —and——"

He hesitated and seemed at a loss how to express himself. My *vis-à-vis* smiled—a smile of peculiar bitterness it was—and interrupted cynically:

"And that I am a reformed character, I suppose you would say, and have become a respectable member of society! No, no, Lord Langerdale, I am no hypocrite, and I shall never tell her that. A wanderer upon the face of the earth I have been during the best years of my life, and a wanderer I shall always be—adventurer, some people have said. Well, well, let it be so; what matter?"

Lord Langerdale shook his head doubtfully.

"I am sorry to hear you talk so, Eugène; but of one thing you may always be sure—Elsie and I will never be your judges. If you feel that it will reopen old wounds, stop away; but if not, why, come and see us. You have a young friend with you," he added, turning slightly towards me and speaking a little more earnestly than the occasion seemed to require.

The man whom he called Eugène shook his head.

"I am not so fortunate," he said stiffly, "I can

claim no more than what on the Continent we call a ' table acquaintance ' with this young gentleman."

It might have been my fancy, but it seemed to me that Lord Langerdale looked distinctly disappointed. He bowed courteously to me, however, shook hands with his friend and rejoined his wife. My new acquaintance resumed his former position, and, with it, his old nonchalant manner.

"Your pardon," he said lightly, "for this long digression. And now tell me, *mon ami*, shall we spend the evening together? You are a stranger in London, you say; I am not," he added drily. "Come, shall I be your cicerone?"

I really had nothing else to do, so I assented at once.

"Good! Let us finish the bottle to a pleasant evening. But, ah! I forgot. We must be introduced. The English custom demands it, even though we introduce ourselves. Your name is?"

"Morton," I answered—"Philip Morton. I haven't a card."

"Good! Then, Mr. Philip Morton, permit me the honour of introducing to you—myself. I am called De Cartienne—the Count Eugène de Cartienne—but I do not use the title in this country."

CHAPTER XLII.

NEWS OF MR. MARX.

For a moment or two I remained quite silent, for the simple reason that I was far too astonished to make any remark. My new acquaintance sat looking at me with slightly-raised eyebrows and carelessly toying with his eyeglass; yet, notwithstanding his apparent nonchalance, I felt somehow aware that he was watching me keenly.

"My name appears to be a surprise to you," he remarked, keeping his eyes fixed steadily upon my face. "Have you heard it before, may I ask?"

"Yes," I assented, "one of the fellows down at Borden Tower——"

"What, you know Leonard?" he interrupted. "Egad! how strange! Then you are one of Dr. Randall's pupils, I suppose?"

"Yes; I have only been there a very short time, though. And Leonard is——"

"My son."

I looked at him intently. Now that the fact itself had been suggested to me, I could certainly trace some faint likeness. But what puzzled me most was that he seemed also to remind me, although more vaguely, of someone else, whom I could not call to mind at all. Neither did he seem particularly anxious for me to assist him, for, as

though somewhat annoyed at my close scrutiny, he rose abruptly to his feet.

"Come, what do you say to cigarettes and coffee? We are outstaying everybody here."

I followed him downstairs into the smoke-room. We seated ourselves upon a luxurious divan, and the Count immediately began to talk about his son.

"And so you know Leonard? How strange! Do you see much of one another?"

"Naturally, considering that there are only three of us at Dr. Randall's," I reminded him.

"Ah, just so! And your other fellow pupil is young Lord Silchester, is he not? Rather an awkward number, three. Do you all chum together pretty well?"

What was I to say? I could not tell him that my relations with his son were decidedly inimical; so, after a moment's hesitation, I answered a little evasively:

"I'm afraid we're not a very sociable trio. You see, Cis and I are very keen on out-of-door amusements, and your son rather prefers reading."

He nodded.

"Yes; I quite understand. You and Lord Silchester are thoroughly English, and essentially so in your tastes and love of sport. Leonard, now, is more than half a foreigner. His mother was an Austrian lady, and I myself am of French extraction. By the by, Mr. Morton, may I ask you a question—in confidence?" he added slowly.

"Certainly."

"It is about Leonard. I don't think that you need have any scruples about telling me, for I am his father, you know, and have a certain right to know everything about him."

He looked at me gravely, as though for confirmation of his words, and I silently expressed my assent. Leonard de Cartienne was nothing to me;

and if his father was going to ask me the question which I hoped he was, he should have a straightforward answer.

"I sent my son to Dr. Randall's," he began, sinking his voice to a confidential whisper, "not because he was backward in his studies—for such is not, I believe, the case—but because he has unfortunately inherited a very deplorable taste. I found it out only by accident, and it was a very great shock to me. Leonard is fond—too fond—of playing cards for money. I thought that at Borden Tower he would have no opportunity for indulging this lamentable weakness; but from what I have recently heard about Dr. Randall, it has occurred to me that he is perhaps a little too much of the student and too little of the schoolmaster. You understand me? I mean that he is perhaps so closely wrapped up in his private work, that after the hours which he gives to his pupils for instruction they may secure almost as much liberty as though they were at college."

"That's just it," I answered: "and, M. de Cartienne, now that you have spoken to me of it, I will tell you something. Your son does play a good deal with Lord Silchester. I know that this is so, for I have played myself occasionally."

"And Lord Silchester wins, I presume?"

Something in the Count's tone as he asked the question, and something in his face as I glanced up, did not please me. Both seemed to tell the same tale, both somehow seemed to imply that his question to me was altogether sarcastic, and that he knew the contrary to be the case.

It was the first gleam of mistrust which I had felt towards my new acquaintance, and it did not last, for the expression of deep concern and annoyance with which he heard my answer seemed too natural to be assumed.

"On the contrary, your son always wins," I told him drily.

His finely-pencilled dark eyebrows almost met in a heavy frown, and he threw his cigarette away impatiently.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Morton, for answering my question," he said; "but I needn't tell you that I'm very sorry to hear what you say. Something must be done with Mr. Leonard at once."

He lit another cigarette and threw himself back in a corner of the divan. Then I made up my mind to speak to him on the subject which was uppermost in my mind.

"You know a Mr. Marx, I believe? I was inquiring for him at the hotel office this afternoon, and they told me that you were forwarding his letters. Could you give me his address?"

M. de Cartienne removed his cigarette from his teeth, and looked dubious.

"Yes, I know Marx; know him well," he admitted; "but your request puts me in rather an awkward position. You see, this is how the matter lies," he added, leaning forward confidentially. "Marx and I are old friends, and he's been of great service to me more than once, and never asked for any return. Well, I met him—I won't say when, but it wasn't long ago—in Pall Mall, and he hailed me as the very man he was most anxious to meet. We lunched together, and then he told me what he wanted. He was in London for a short while, he said, and wished to remain perfectly incognito. There would be letters for him, he said, at the Metropole. Would I fetch them, and forward them to him at an address which he would give me, on condition that I gave him my word of honour to keep it secret? I asked, naturally, what reason he had for going into hiding; for virtually that is what it seemed to me to be; but he would give me

no definite answer. Would I do him this favour or not? he asked. And, remembering the many services which he had rendered me, I found it quite impossible to refuse. That is my position. I'm really extremely sorry not to be able to help you, but you see for yourself that I cannot."

His tone was perfectly serious and his manner earnest. I had not the faintest shadow of doubt as to his sincerity.

"You can't help me at all, then?" I said, no doubt with some of the disappointment which I felt in my tone.

He looked doubtful.

"Well, I don't quite know about that," he said slowly, as though weighing something over in his mind. "Look here, Mr. Morton," he added, frankly enough, "what do you want with the man? Is it anything unpleasant?"

"Not at all," I answered. "I do not wish any harm to Mr. Marx unless he deserves it. I want to ask him a few questions, that's all. Unless the man's a perfect scoundrel he will be able to answer them satisfactorily, and my having discovered his whereabouts will not harm him. If, on the other hand, he cannot answer those questions, why, then, you may take my word for it, M. de Cartienne, that he's an unmitigated blackguard, perfectly unworthy of your friendship, and undeserving of the slightest consideration from you."

M. de Cartienne nodded and leaned forward, with his arm across the divan.

"You put the matter very plainly," he said, "and what you say is fair enough. I'll tell you how far I am prepared to help you. I won't tell you Mr. Marx's address, because I have pledged my word not to divulge it; but, if you like, I'll take you where there will be a very fair chance of your seeing him."

"He is in London, then?"

The Count shrugged his shoulders and smiled slightly.

"Permit me to keep my word in the letter, if not in the spirit," he answered. "I am going to spend my evening in this way; I am going, first of all, to a theatre for an hour or so; then I am going to call at a couple of clubs, and afterwards I am going to a club of a somewhat different sort. If you like to be my companion for the evening I shall be charmed; and if it should happen that we run up against any friend of yours—well, the world is not so very large, after all."

"Thanks. I'll come with you with pleasure!" I answered without hesitation.

He stood up underneath the soft glare of the electric light, and as I turned towards him something in his face puzzled me. It was gone directly my eyes met his—gone, but not before it had left a curious impression. It seemed almost as though a triumphant light had flashed for an instant in his bright, steel-coloured eyes.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ABOUT TOWN.

We passed up the heavily-carpeted steps into the central hall of the hotel. The Count stopped for a moment to inquire for letters at the chief porter's bureau, and as we turned away we came face to face with Lord Langerdale.

He hesitated when he saw us together, but only for a moment. Then he advanced with a genial smile upon his well-cut, handsome face.

"You're the very man I wanted to see, De Cartienne," he said. "I suppose you know your young friend's name by this time? Will you introduce us?"

The Count looked distinctly annoyed, but he complied at once.

"Lord Langerdale," he said coldly, "this is Mr. Morton. Mr. Morton—Lord Langerdale."

Lord Langerdale held out his hand frankly and drew me a little on one side, although not out of the Count's hearing.

"Mr. Morton," he said pleasantly, "I am going to make a somewhat extraordinary request. My only excuse for it is a lady's will, and when you reach my age you will know that it is a thing by no means to be lightly regarded. My wife has been very much impressed by what she terms a marvellous likeness between you and—and a very near

relative of hers whom she had lost sight of for a long while. She is most anxious to make your acquaintance. May I have the honour of presenting you to her ? "

For a moment my head swam. The likeness of Lady Langerdale to my mother, and then this strange fancy on her part ! What if they should be something more than coincidences ? The very thought was bewildering. But how could it be ? No ; the thing was impossible. Still, the request was couched in such terms that there could be but one answer.

" I shall be extremely pleased ! " I declared readily.

" Then come into the drawing-room for a few minutes, will you ? " Lord Langerdale said. " Good-night, Eugène ! No use asking you to join us, I know."

Count de Cartienne turned on his heel with brow as black as thunder.

" Good-night, Lord Langerdale ! " he said stiffly. " Good-night, Mr. Morton ! "

" But I am coming with you, you know ! " I exclaimed, surprised at his manner. " Couldn't you wait for me five minutes ? "

" It is impossible ! " he answered shortly ; " we are late already ! My carriage must have been waiting half an hour. I had no idea of the time."

It was rather an embarrassing moment for me. The Count evidently expected me to keep my engagement with him, and would be offended if I did not do so. On the other hand, Lord Langerdale was waiting to take me to his wife, and, from the slight frown with which he was regarding De Cartienne, I judged that he did not approve of his interference.

Inclination prompted me strongly to throw my engagement with the Count to the winds and to

place myself under Lord Langerdale's guidance. But, after all, the sole purpose of my journey to London was to discover Mr. Marx, and if I neglected this opportunity I might lose sight of the only man who could help me in my search. Clearly, therefore, my duty was to fulfil my prior engagement.

"If M. de Cartienne cannot wait," I said regretfully, "I am afraid, Lord Langerdale, that the pleasure you offer me must be deferred. Would Lady Langerdale allow me to call at your rooms to-morrow?"

Evidently he was displeased, for his manner changed at once.

"I will leave a note for you with the hall porter," he said. "Good-night."

I turned away with the Count, who preserved a perfectly unmoved countenance. Before we had taken half a dozen steps, however, he was accosted by a gentleman entering the hotel, and, turning round, he begged me to excuse him for a moment.

I strolled away by myself, waiting. Suddenly, I felt a light touch on my arm, and, looking round, I found Lord Langerdale by my side.

"I just want to ask you a question, Mr. Morton, if you'll allow me," he said kindly. "Remember that I'm an old man—old enough to be your father—and a man of the world, and you are a very young one. You won't mind a word of advice?"

"Most certainly not!" I assured him heartily.

"Well, then, Count de Cartienne is quite a new acquaintance of yours, is he not?"

"I never saw him before this evening," I admitted.

"And you—pardon me, but you look very young, and a great deal too fresh and healthy for a town man—you don't know much of London life, do you?"

"Nothing at all," I answered. "This is my

first visit to London, and I only arrived this afternoon."

Lord Langerdale looked very serious.

"Look here, Mr. Morton," he said earnestly, "I feel sure from your face that I can trust you, and that what I am going to say you will consider in confidence. I should be the last one to say anything against Eugène de Cartienne, for he received a terrible injury from one of my family, or, rather, my wife's family, and I fear that has exercised an evil influence over his life. But, all the same, I cannot see you, a youngster, perfectly inexperienced, starting out to spend your first night in town with him without feeling it my duty to tell you that I consider him one of the most unfortunate and most dangerous companions whom you could have chosen. There! I hope you're not offended?"

"How could I be?" I answered gratefully. "But I am not going out with him from choice, or for the sake of amusement. We are together simply because, as far as I know, he is the only man who can solve a mystery which I have come up to London to try to clear up."

Lord Langerdale started, and his manner became almost agitated.

"This is most extraordinary!" he declared. "Mr. Morton, you must—ah, here comes De Cartienne!" he broke off in a tone of deep annoyance. "Breakfast with me to-morrow morning at ten—no, nine o'clock!" he added, in a lower key. "I have something most important to say to you."

I nodded assent and the Count joined us.

There was a faint flush on his pale cheeks and his eyes were flashing brightly, as he looked at us standing close together. It might have been the result of his recent conversation, of course; but, coupled with his frowning brow and quick, suspicious glance, it looked a great deal more like a

sudden fit of anger at seeing us engaged in what appeared like a confidential talk. But there was no trace of it in his tone when he addressed us.

"Really, you two might be conspirators," he said lightly. "Well, Mr. Morton, have you changed your mind, or am I to have the honour of your company this evening?"

"I am ready to start when you are," I answered. "Good-night once more, Lord Langerdale."

He shook my hand warmly, nodded to the Count, who returned the salute with a stiff bow, and left us. We descended into the street, and a very small, neat brougham, drawn by a pair of dark, handsome bays, drew up at the entrance. The coachman's livery was perfectly plain, save that he wore a cockade in his hat, and there was neither coat-of-arms nor crest upon the panel of the door. We stepped inside, and the Count held a speaking-tube for a moment to his mouth while he consulted his watch. There was no footman.

"Frivolity Theatre," he directed. And we drove off at a smart pace into the Strand.

We reached our destination in a few moments and had no difficulty in obtaining seats. It was all new to me, and I felt a little bewildered as I endeavoured to follow the performance. I soon had enough of that. The piece was a screaming farce, vulgar and stupid.

"I don't think Mr. Marx is here," I whispered to De Cartienne.

"I don't think he is," was the rejoinder. "I had a good look round for him when we came in. Have you had enough of this performance? If so, we'll go. I think I know where we shall find Marx."

"Then let us go at once," I urged.

We passed out of the theatre into the street. The brougham was there waiting for us.

"Jump in!" said the Count, opening the door. "I'm going to tell the fellow where to drive to."

I obeyed him, and waited for nearly a minute before he had given his directions and joined me. Then he took his seat by my side and we drove quickly off.

"Why did you not use the speaking tube?" I asked idly.

He answered without looking at me.

"It is rather an out-of-the-way place," he said slowly, "and I did not wish the man to make a mistake."

CHAPTER XLIV.

A MIDNIGHT EXCURSION TO THE SUBURBS.

DURING the earlier part of the evening, since we had left the hotel, my companion had shown no disposition to talk. On the contrary, his silence amounted almost to moroseness, and he had not always answered my questions. But immediately we had started on this new expedition his manner underwent a complete change. He seemed to lay himself out with feverish eagerness to entertain me and to absorb my attention.

"I hope you're not tired," he said suddenly, at the end of one of his anecdotes. "We have rather a long drive before us."

"Not in the least," I assured him. "What is the place we are going to?"

"A sort of private club. In confidence, I'll tell you why it is so far out of the way. Some of the members are fond of playing a little high, and have started a roulette board. That sort of thing is best kept quiet, you know."

"The place is a gambling-club, then?"

"Something of that sort," he acknowledged. "I shouldn't dream of taking you there if it wasn't for the sake of meeting Marx. You understand?"

"Perfectly, thanks. Save for that reason I shouldn't think of going."

"What an infernal night!" he exclaimed, looking

out of the carriage for a moment; "almost enough to give one the miserables. Come, we'll shut it out." He struck a match and, turning round, lit a lamp which was fixed at the back of the carriage. Then he quietly pulled down the blinds and began to tell me a story, of which I heard not a word. My thoughts were engrossed by another matter. M. de Cartienne's action, coupled with the strangeness of his manner, could bear but one interpretation.

He had some reason for keeping me as much as possible in the dark as to the route we were taking.

For a few moments I felt, to put it mildly, uneasy. Then several possible explanations of such conduct occurred to me, and my apprehensions grew weaker. What more natural, after all, than that M. de Cartienne should desire to keep secret from me the exact whereabouts of an establishment which, by his own admission, was maintained contrary to the law? The more I considered it, the more reasonable such an explanation appeared to me. I began to wonder, even, that he had not asked me for some pledge of secrecy. But there was time enough for that.

By degrees the rattling of vehicles around us grew less and less, until at last all traffic seemed to have died away. Once, during a pause in the conversation, I raised the blind a little way and looked out. We had left even the region of suburban semi-detached villas; and, blurred though the prospect was by the mud which the fast-rolling wheels drew incessantly into the air and on to the window-panes, I could just distinguish the dim outline of hedges and fields beyond.

I looked at the carriage-clock and found that we had been already an hour and a quarter on our journey. From the furious pace at which we were travelling we must have come nearly fifteen miles.

"This place is a long way out," I remarked.

The Count laughed and lit a cigarette. "Oh, there's a good reason for that. But the men don't drive here from town—at least, not in the winter. There's a railway-station only a mile away."

"We're almost there now, then, I suppose?"

He let the blind up with a spring and looked out.

"Nearer than I imagined," he remarked. "We shall be there in three minutes."

He was just drawing in his head when he gave a visible start and leaned right out of the window, with his face upturned to the beating rain, listening intently.

Suddenly he withdrew it, and, snatching at the check-string, pulled it violently. I looked at him in amazement. His face was ghastly pale, but his thin lips were set firmly together and his features rigid with determination. It was the face of a brave, desperate man preparing to meet some terrible danger.

The carriage pulled up with a jerk and he leaped down into the road. He did not speak to me, so, after a second's hesitation, I followed him and stood by his side. There was no mistaking the sound which had alarmed him. Behind, at no very great distance, was the sound of galloping horses and the rumble of smoothly-turning wheels.

Round the corner it came, a small brougham drawn by a pair of great thoroughbred horses, whose heavy gallop, even at fifty yards' distance, seemed to shake the ground beneath us. M. de Cartienne snatched one of the carriage-lamps from the bracket and, stepping into the middle of the road, waved it backwards and forwards over his head. His action had the desired effect.

Quivering and plunging with fear, the horses, bathed in foam and mud, came to a standstill before us, and a tall, fair man, with a long fur coat

thrown hurriedly over his evening-clothes, leaped out into the road. The Count was by his side in a moment.

I remained a little apart, of course, out of earshot, but with my eyes fixed upon the two men.

They could scarcely have spoken a hundred words before their colloquy was at an end. The new-comer returned to his carriage and M. de Cartienne followed his example. I looked at him as he stepped in, anxious to see what effect the other's news had had upon him. Apparently it was not so bad as he had feared, for, although he still looked anxious and pale, his face had lost its ghastly hue.

We drove on in the same direction as before. When we had started he turned to me.

"Do you know what a police raid is?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Well, I can't stop to explain," he went on rapidly. "Sir Fred—my friend there, has just brought down word of some strange rumours about the clubs to-night. It seems the police have got to hear of this place and are going to pay it an uninvited visit. They won't be here for an hour, though, so if you like just to come inside and see whether Marx is there or not, you will have time."

We had turned off the road into a bare, grass-grown avenue, leading up to a red-brick house, unilluminated by a single light.

We were barely a minute driving up this uninviting approach and pulling up at the grim, closed door. The carriage had scarcely come to a standstill before the Count was on the doorstep, fitting a curiously-shaped key into the lock. It yielded at once and we both stepped inside, followed by the man in the fur overcoat, whose carriage had pulled up close behind ours.

We were in perfect darkness and no one seemed

to be stirring in the house, although the mat under our feet, in some way connected with an electric alarm bell, was giving shrill notice of our arrival. Then we heard swift feet approaching and a tall, hard-featured woman in a plain black gown, and holding a lamp high over her head, appeared before us.

M. de Cartienne took her by the arm and led her on one side. The other man, who was making vain attempts to appear at his ease and composed, sank into a chair, palpably trembling. Of the real nature of the danger which was imminent I could form only the slightest idea; but that it was something very much to be feared I could easily gather from his agitation and De Cartienne's manner.

Suddenly the latter turned round.

"Ackland," he said quickly to the man in the chair, eyeing him keenly and with a shade of contempt in his tone, "you are not fit for any of the serious work, I can see. Listen! Light up the club-room and the smoke-room, stir up the fires, bring out the cards and wine-glasses, empty some tobacco-ash about, make the place look habitable for us when we come. Ferdinand is on the watch outside and will give you notice of our visitors. Ring all three alarm-bells at once if he gives the signal. Morton, I want you to wait for me. I'll send you away all right before anything happens; but don't go unless you see me again—unless you're frightened."

He turned on his heel and, without waiting for any answer from either of us, hurried away down the passage. The man whom he had called Ackland rose from his seat and, striking a match, lighted the gas-brackets all around the hall and the burners of a candelabra which hung from the roof.

My companion then threw open a door and I followed him into a luxuriously-appointed room,

furnished with a suite of lounges and easy-chairs corresponding with those in the hall.

Whilst I was looking round, he hastily began moving the chairs about, as though they had been recently used, poking the fire and generally making the place look inhabited. Having done this, he crossed the hall and entered the opposite room. It was a little smaller, but similarly appointed and decorated, save that a long table, covered with a white cloth and laid for dinner, stood in the centre, and a smaller one, with a green baize covering at the further end. My companion threw a pack of cards and some counters upon the latter and drew it closer up to the fire. Then, having placed some chairs around it, he went back into the hall again and I followed.

All the while we had been moving about, strange noises had been going on under our feet. Now and then the sound of hurrying footsteps and of hoarse voices reached us, and, more often still, the steady rumbling of heavy articles being moved about. I looked at my companion for an explanation, but he did not seem inclined to offer one.

"What's going on underneath?" I asked at last.

"Bowls!" he answered curtly. "Don't talk, please, I want to listen."

CHAPTER XLV.

A MYSTERIOUS COMMISSION.

The underground noises continued for about a quarter of an hour, during which time my companion busied himself by removing from the club-room various articles—the false top of a table marked out in a curious fashion, several mahogany boxes, and other contrivances strange to me, but presumably gambling appliances, with all of which he disappeared through the door by which De Cartienne had made his exit, returning again directly.

At last everything was quiet, ominously quiet; then the door from the hall was thrown suddenly open, and the Count entered, followed by four or five other men. They were all apparently gentlemen, and in evening clothes, but terribly soiled and disordered. Some were splashed with mud from head to foot, some had their shirt-fronts blackened and crumpled, and the hands of all of them were black with grease and dirt. All looked more or less pale and nervous—in fact, M. de Cartienne was the only one who thoroughly retained his composure.

There was a lavatory on the other side of the staircase, towards which the whole of the little party trooped, M. de Cartienne being the last. As he disappeared he looked round and beckoned

me to follow him. I did so and stood by his side, while he plunged his head into some cold water, and then began to wash his hands.

"I'm sorry this should have happened to-night, Morton," he said. "Marx was here, but has bolted in a fright."

"Couldn't I catch him up?" I asked.

De Cartienne shook his head.

"No; he's in the train by this time. He comes here every night, though. I'll bring you down to-morrow, perhaps."

"Are you coming back now?" I asked.

"No; I must see this thing through. You can go and at once, though. My carriage will take you back. I shall return by train. By the by, there's a small favour I want to ask you.

"Certainly."

"I have kept a few private papers here, which I should not care to have examined should the search really take place. I want you to take them back to the hotel for me. The box is a little too heavy for me to carry, so I have told them to put it in the carriage as a footstool for you. You won't mind that?"

"Not in the least," I replied. "When shall I see you again?"

"At the hotel some time to-morrow. Come along now," he added, putting on his coat.

He strolled with me to the front door and, throwing it open, listened intently.

There was no sound save the moaning of the wind in the bare trees which stood by the side of the house and the patter of the fast-falling rain. I stepped into the carriage and the Count came to the window to me.

"Don't forget," he said, pointing to a long, oblong box secured by a strong lock. "Draw the rug a little more over your knees—so."

I obeyed him and let it hang down to hide the box, which I began to see was his object.

"And if you should meet anyone and they should be impertinent enough to ask you where you are going, don't tell them. Give them your card and tell them to go to the devil. If they are very pressing indeed, you must tell a lie. Say that you've been to dine with Sir Sedgwick Bromley at Hatherly Hall. Don't forget the name."

"Very well. Are you coming back to the Metropole to-night?" I asked.

"I think so. But if you don't mind I should be glad if you would have the box taken up into your room and keep it for me. I shouldn't like anything to happen to it."

I promised, but without much alacrity. We shook hands and the carriage drove off.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A BRUSH WITH THE POLICE.

We could scarcely have accomplished more than a mile of our homeward journey when, with a sudden jerk which almost threw me forward, the carriage was brought to a standstill.

On the opposite side of the road were two carriages, or, rather, flys, from one of which a tall, slim man was in the act of descending. Several other men on horseback were just riding up from behind. They were all in plain clothes, but something about their *physique* and general appearance had an unmistakable suggestion of police.

The man who had been descending from the nearer of the two carriages crossed the road and approached me.

"Sorry to detain you, sir," he said, saluting in military fashion, "but I must ask you your name and address and where you have been this evening."

"I don't know whether it has occurred to you that your behaviour is rather strange," I remarked, looking at him steadily, "not to say impertinent! What the mischief do you mean by stopping my carriage in this way on the high road and asking me questions like that? Who are you?"

He hesitated, and then answered with a little more respect in his manner.

"I am deputy chief sergeant at Scotland Yard, sir, and these are my men. We have a little business at a house not far from here, and our orders are to detain and procure the names and addresses of all persons whom we might encounter of whom we had reasonable suspicion that they had recently left the house in question. You will not object to give me your name, sir?"

"Certainly not. My name is Philip Morton, and my general address is Ravenor Castle, Leicestershire. At present I am staying at the Metropole Hotel. Are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly, sir," he answered, after one more rapid glance around the carriage. "I see that you are not concerned in this affair. I wish you good-night!"

We drove rapidly off, and I began to feel not a little dissatisfied with myself. The Count had no right to have mixed me up in this affair.

In my ill-temper I gave the box, which lay concealed under my feet, a savage kick, sufficient to have sent it flying to the other end of the carriage. But there was a little surprise in store for me. To my amazement the box remained perfectly immovable, just as though it had been screwed into the bottom of the carriage.

Forgetting the Count's earnest injunctions, I threw aside the rug and, stooping down, tried to lift it by the handles. In those days I was proud of my muscles, and not altogether without reason, but it needed all my strength to lift that small box from the ground and hold it for a moment in my arms. What could it contain? Papers, cards, gambling appliances? Surely it could be none of these! The very idea was ridiculous! The Count de Cartienne had deceived me. I had been made the catspaw of those pale, anxious men who had watched me start so eagerly and scanned

me over with many furtive glances. What it was of which I was in charge, I could not tell; but in that box lay their secret, and my first indignant impulse was to open the carriage door and kick it out into the road.

But are not second thoughts always better? Might not this affair shape itself to my advantage? There need be no more obligations to the Count de Cartienne. He was possessed of information which was valuable to me. I was possessed of this box, which, without doubt, was invaluable to him. I would propose an exchange—he should bring me face to face with Mr. Marx and receive his precious box; or, if he refused to do so, its destination should be Scotland Yard. A very equitable arrangement!

CHAPTER XLVII.

LIGHT AT LAST.

We were in London again, bowling smoothly along wide stretches of silent, gas-lit streets, empty, and almost deserted now, for it was past two o'clock.

Soon we turned sharply into Northumberland Avenue, and pulled up at the hotel. The man on the box—footman I suppose he was, although he was not in livery—opened the carriage-door for me and then took possession of the small trunk.

"If you will allow me, sir, I will take this up to your room," he said.

"You needn't trouble," I answered. "I can manage."

He retained possession of it.

"The Count's orders were, sir, that I should not allow the hotel servants to meddle with it, and that, if possible, I should myself see it deposited in your room. You have no objection, sir, I hope?"

"Not at all," I answered, turning away. "In fact, the less I have to do with it the better."

We entered the hotel and, crossing the hall, rang for the lift.

The lift came to a standstill at the third floor and we stepped out on to the corridor.

The Count's servant followed me to my room, deposited the box on a chair at the foot of the bed and wished me good-night.

I then got into bed and, full of excitement though the day had been for me, slept soundly till morning.

It was five minutes past nine when I entered the great salon of the hotel and looked round for Lord Langerdale.

My search was not a long one. He was sitting alone at a table laid for three in one of the deep recesses, with a little pile of letters and a newspaper before him. Directly he saw me he pushed them away and held out his hand.

"Good-morning!" he said pleasantly. "I'm glad to see you're so punctual. You're not in a hurry for breakfast for a few minutes, are you?"

"Not at all," I answered, taking the chair which he pushed towards me.

"That's right. My wife will be down in a quarter of an hour, and we'll wait for her, if you don't mind."

I bowed my assent, murmuring that I should be delighted, which was perfectly true.

Lord Langerdale turned a little round in his chair so as to face me and began at once:

"I am rather a blunt sort of man, Mr. Morton—we Irish generally are, you know—and I like to go straight at a thing. Will you tell me your mother's maiden name?"

"I would with pleasure if I knew it," I answered readily; "but I don't."

"Is she alive?"

I shook my head.

"She died about nine months ago."

"And Morton is your name? May I ask who your father was?"

"Certainly. He was a farmer in Leicestershire."

"A farmer?" Lord Langerdale looked surprised and I fancied a little disappointed. "Was he your mother's first husband?"

I was about to answer in the affirmative, but remembered that I had no certain knowledge, so I corrected myself.

"You may think it strange, Lord Langerdale," I said, "but I know nothing of my mother's antecedents, nor of her family. From my earliest recollection she never mentioned her past, nor permitted others to do so. There was some mystery connected with it, I am sure; but what it was I have no clue.

"I could not help observing, as everyone else did, that she was far above my father from a social point of view, for she was an educated lady and he was only a small tenant farmer. Throughout all her life she was reticent, and her last act before she died was a paradox. She left me to the guardianship of the man whom she had always before seemed to dread and fear."

"What is his name?"

"Mr. Ravenor, of Ravenor Castle. We were tenants of his."

"My God!"

Lord Langerdale's whole appearance was that of a man strongly agitated. He turned his head away for a moment, and the long, white fingers which supported it were shaking visibly.

I, too, was moved, for it seemed as though the time were come at last when something of my mother's history would be made known to me. But he seemed in no hurry to speak again. It was I who had to remind him of my presence.

"Lord Langerdale," I cried, my voice, despite all my efforts, trembling with eagerness, "you know who my mother was? You can tell me her history?"

He turned round slowly.

"One more question," he said. "Are you sure that you were born at Ravenor?"

"I have never heard otherwise," I told him. "But when I asked my mother once at which church I was christened, she could not tell me and forbade me to ask again."

Lord Langerdale looked puzzled for a moment, and then asked me my age, which I told him.

"Do you remember the time when news came of Mr. Ravenor, after he had been supposed to have been dead for so long?"

"Yes. It is about my earliest distinct recollection," I answered.

"Do you remember how your mother received the news?"

Yes, I remembered. Even at that moment a vision rose up before me. I saw her standing beneath the ivy-covered porch of our farmhouse, her beautiful face ghastly with sudden pallor, and her wild eyes riveted upon my father's burly figure, as he shouted out the tidings. I described the scene to Lord Langerdale.

"And afterwards did she ever mention Mr. Ravenor's name to you? Did she see anything of him?" he asked, when I had finished.

Briefly I told him of her warnings, of my meeting with Mr. Ravenor, of his proposal to adopt me, and of my mother's death, and how at the end she suddenly turned round and left me to his guardianship. When I had finished he laid his hand upon my arm.

"Let us go upstairs to my rooms," he said kindly.

"If my wife were to come in now and learn the truth—and I'm a bad hand at keeping anything back from her—I'm afraid the shock would be too much for her. Come with me and I will tell you your mother's history."

So I rose and followed him with beating heart.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A PAGE OF HISTORY.

LORD LANGERDALE'S suite of apartments was on the second floor, and when we reached them it was no small relief to me to find the room into which we turned empty. I sank mechanically into the chair to which he pointed, whilst he himself remained standing a few feet away from me.

"From what you have told me," he said gravely, "I have not the least doubt but that my wife and your mother were sisters."

I gave a little gasp and began to wonder whether this was not all a wild dream. Lord Langerdale remained silent, whilst I recovered myself in some measure.

"Will you tell me about it?" I asked slowly. "I don't understand."

"I will tell you everything," Lord Langerdale said kindly. "This is a great surprise to you, of course, and quite as great a one to me. Here is the story—or, rather, as much as I know of it."

He cleared his throat and took a chair by my side. Everything else in the room except his face was blurred and indistinct, and his voice seemed to come to me from a long dis-

tance. But every word he uttered sank into my heart.

"Your grandfather was a very poor and very proud English baronet — Sir Arthur Montavon. My wife Elsie and your mother were his only children, and they were twins. They were presented at Court together, created an equal sensation, and were at once allowed to be the beauties of the season. This was the time when I first knew them, so it is here that I begin my tale.

"Six months after their appearance in Society, Elsie was engaged to be married to me. But your mother seemed to be more difficult to please. She refused several very good offers, and at the end of her first season she was still free.

"I don't know exactly how or where she first met him," Lord Langerdale continued slowly; "but before the following spring your mother was betrothed to the Count de Cartienne. At that time he was one of the richest, the best-looking, and most popular men about town. There seemed to be nothing which he could not do, no art in which he was not proficient, and he was passionately in love with your mother. Whether she ever really cared for him I cannot tell; but if she did, it could only have been a very transitory feeling.

"The marriage-day was fixed and was a general topic of conversation. I even believe that your mother had begun to prepare her trousseau, when something happened. Count de Cartienne was deposed from his post of chief favourite in Society, which he at one time held, by a younger and more extraordinary man. That man was——"

"Mr. Ravenor!" I exclaimed.

Lord Langerdale nodded.

"I don't think," he went on, "that you can

possibly imagine from the Mr. Ravenor of to-day what he was when he became the rage of London Society. He had just returned from his first journey in the East, after some perilous adventures, which had filled the columns of the newspapers for weeks and had already created a strong curiosity about him. I met him, I think, on the first evening he entered a London drawing-room, and I will never forget it.

"He was as handsome as a Greek god, with limbs magnificently developed by his hardy, vigorous life and rigid asceticism, with the head of a Byron, the manners of a Grandison, and the fire and eloquence of a Burke, when he chose to open his mouth.

"Men and women alike were fascinated, which was all the more remarkable as he sought no intimate amongst the former, and studiously avoided compromising himself with any of the latter, although, Heaven knows, he had no lack of opportunity. The only man with whom he seemed to be on at all friendly terms was De Cartienne; and the only woman to whom he paid any save the most ordinary attention was your mother."

Lord Langerdale paused for several moments and seemed wrapped in a brown study, from which my impatience aroused him. He continued at once:

"Things went on smoothly for a time, and then rumours began to get about. At first there were only faint whispers, but presently people began to talk openly. Count de Cartienne had better beware, they said, or he would lose his bride. At first he treated all such suggestions with contempt, but the time came when he was forced to consider them seriously.

"Mr. Ravenor published a small volume of

poems anonymously, amongst which were some passionate love-sonnets addressed to A. M. Everyone was talking of the book and wondering who the new poet was, when, through some treachery in the publisher's office, the secret leaked out, and everyone then knew that those thrilling love-songs were addressed to Alice Montavon.

"De Cartienne went straight to Mr. Ravenor and demanded an explanation. Mr. Ravenor acknowledged the authorship of the poems, and did not deny that the verses in question were addressed to your mother; further than that he would not say a word, and simply referred De Cartienne to her.

"He went straight to her, poor fellow! and was met with a piteous entreaty that he would release her from her engagement. She loved Mr. Ravenor and could marry no one else. What followed remains to some extent a secret; but this much we know:

"There was a furious scene between De Cartienne and your mother, which ended in his refusing to give her up and threatening to shoot his rival if ever he saw them together again. Sir Arthur Montavon, who was deeply in De Cartienne's debt, swore that the marriage should take place, and apparently they gained their end, for Mr. Ravenor suddenly disappeared, and it was reported that he had left the country. On the very day before the wedding, however, Society was furnished with a still more sensational piece of scandal; your mother left her home secretly and the companion of her flight was Mr. Ravenor!"

I could sit still no longer, but rose and walked up and down the room with quick, unsteady strides. Lord Langerdale watched me with a great and growing pity in his honest face. There was

silence between us for several minutes, during which, after one keen, restless look of inquiry, I kept my face turned away from his. Then he continued his story in a somewhat lower key:

"For two days De Cartienne was virtually a maniac. Then he seemed suddenly to come to his senses, and I think we all—Elsie and I especially—dreaded his terrible, set calmness more even than his previous fury. He made no wild threats, nor did he talk to anyone of his intentions. But we all knew what they were; and when he left London, secretly and alone, we trembled, for we knew that he was going in search of your mother. He needed no help, for he was himself a born detective, and possessed in a marvellous degree the art of disguising himself.

"Every day we searched the newspapers anxiously, dreading lest we should read of the tragedy which we feared was inevitable. But we heard nothing. The weeks crept on into months and the months to years and still we heard nothing —not even from your mother.

"We advertised, made every possible form of inquiry, but in vain. Then came the news of Mr. Ravenor's shipwreck and supposed death, and we concluded that your mother had perished with him. I accepted a foreign appointment, and only returned to England, after ten years' absence, last week. I heard at once of Mr. Ravenor's marvellous return to life and I wrote to him. The only reply I received was a single sentence:

"'You can tell your wife that her sister is dead. I have no more to say.'

"Only yesterday, to my amazement, I met De Cartienne again, and with him, you, who, I felt sure from the beginning, must be Alice's son. It may seem strange to you that I should

know so much and yet know no more. But it is so."

I turned round and faced him slowly.

"Do you mean to say, then, that after her elopement my mother never once communicated with her father or sister?"

"Only in this way. She left a private message for my wife, telling her through whom to forward a letter, but not disclosing her whereabouts. Sir Arthur Montavon intercepted the message and took advantage of it to write a cruel, stern letter, forbidding her ever to appear in his presence again, or to address him or her sister; and I am sorry to say that, at his command, my wife, too, wrote in a censorious vein, hoping to make up for it by sending another letter a few days afterwards. The first letter your mother received; the second missed her. She inherited a good deal of her father's firmness, almost severity, of disposition, and I have no doubt that the receipt of those letters would lead her to cut herself off altogether from her family."

"Then you do not even know where she and Mr. Ravenor were married?" I asked huskily.

Lord Langerdale shook his head, and I noticed that he failed to look me in the face. I braced myself up with a great effort.

"Lord Langerdale," I said quietly, "this is a matter of life or death to me. You seem to avoid my question. Answer me this: Have you any reason to suppose that—that there was no marriage?"

"None at all," he answered quickly. "But, my dear boy," he went on, coming over to my side and resting his hand upon my shoulder, "it is always as well to be prepared for the worst. I will tell you how it has seemed to me sometimes. Mr. Ravenor had very peculiar views with regard

to marriage, something similar to those Shelley held in his youth, and we never heard of any ceremony, which seems strange. Then, too, their separation and your mother's marriage to a farmer, her stern, lonely life afterwards, and the fact that your birth has been kept concealed from you——"

He hesitated and seemed to gather encouragement from my face. I could not, I would not, for a moment share his fear when I thought steadfastly about it. I thought of my mother dying, with a saint-like peace upon her face, in Mr. Ravenor's arms. I thought of the calm, sorrowful dignity of her life, and the idea refused for a moment to linger in my mind. Some other great cause for estrangement there must have been between them, but not that—not that!

"I will go down and see Ravenor to-day," Lord Langerdale declared, with sudden energy. "I will wrest the truth from him."

I shook my head.

"This matter lies between him and me only," I said, in a low tone. "I will go to him."

The handle of the door was softly turned and Lady Langerdale stood upon the threshold. Her husband went over to her at once.

"Elsie," he said, "you were right. There are many things which yet remain in darkness; but this is Alice's boy—your sister's son."

She came up to me with outstretched hands and a wistful look in her sweet, womanly face.

My heart stood still for a moment, and then gave a great throb as I felt the warm clasp of her hands and the tremulous touch of her lips upon my forehead.

I knew that I had reached a crisis in my life, and though it had brought with it a great

fear, it had also brought a great joy, for it seemed as though the days of my loneliness were over.

Could I doubt it when I looked into Lady Langerdale's face and felt my uncle's warm hand-clasp? There was a sweetness about such a thought hard for another to realise, and for a moment I gave myself up to it. Whilst Lord Langerdale briefly told his wife the few particulars which I had been able to give him of my mother and myself, I stood between the two, keenly conscious of and enjoying the change which seemed hovering over my life.

But afterwards I remembered the ordeal which I had yet to face and the mission which had brought me to London, and they saw the gladness die slowly out of my face.

Lord Langerdale questioned me concerning it, and then I told them everything—told them of our suspicions in connection with Mr. Marx and of my determination to find him out, and discover whether he had been guilty of foul play towards the man Hart.

When I came to my last night's adventure with Count de Cartienne, Lord Langerdale looked very grave.

"It seems to me," he declared, "that this is more a matter for the police than for you to mix yourself up in."

I shook my head. Of one thing I did feel confident, although, as regards the whole of the rest of the affair, I was in a complete maze.

However anxious Mr. Ravenor might be for the truth concerning the missing man to be discovered, he had strong reasons for not wishing the police to take part in the search. I felt sure of that, and was determined to act accordingly.

Lord Langerdale was not easily reassured.

"I don't like the idea of your having anything whatever to do with De Cartienne in all the circumstances," he said, with a shudder. "He can have but one feeling for you, and a more dangerous man does not breathe. It is an evil chance that has brought you together."

CHAPTER XLIX.

I WILL GO ALONE.

We all sat down to breakfast together. Lord Langerdale divided his attention between his breakfast and *The Times*.

"Are you going shopping to-day, Elsie?" he asked, looking up from his paper.

She glanced at him inquiringly.

"I think so. Why?"

"Be very careful about your change, then. There has never been so much bad money about as just now. The papers are full of the most startling rumours. Coining must be going on in London somewhere upon an enormous scale, and the police are—— Why, Philip, what's the matter with you?"

I recovered myself promptly and set down the cup which I had been within an ace of spilling.

"The coffee was a little hot," I said slowly. "It was very stupid of me."

He went on reading and Lady Langerdale began to talk to me. But my attention was wandering. It was a strange idea which had occurred to me, perhaps a ridiculous one. Yet it was possessed of a certain fascination.

In the middle of breakfast a waiter brought me a note. Lady Langerdale's permission was given unasked and I tore it open. It was from

De Cartienne, and the contents, though brief, were to the point:

"My dear Morton,—I have seen the man whom you are seeking and I know for certain where he will be to-morrow night. My carriage shall call for you at ten o'clock in the evening—to-morrow, mind; not this evening—and if you care to come I will bring you to him. By the by, you might as well bring with you the box which you were good enough to take care of—Yours,

"E. de C."

I handed it to Lord Langerdale, who adjusted his glasses and read it through carefully.

"I don't like it," he remarked, when he had finished; "don't like it at all. Take my advice, Philip; send him his box, or whatever it is, and don't go."

I shook my head.

"I must find out about Mr. Marx," I answered, "and I know of no other means. That will be to-morrow night, you know. To-day——"

"Yes, what are we going to do to-day?" Lord Langerdale interrupted.

I answered him without hesitation:

"I am going down to Ravenor Castle."

He looked surprised, a little agitated.

"I shall go with you," Lord Langerdale suddenly declared. "Alice was my sister-in-law, and if Ravenor deserted or ill-used her, I have the right to call him to account for it."

"And I a better one," I reminded him quietly. "Grant me this favour please. I must go alone and see him—alone."

He looked at his wife and she inclined her head towards me.

"The boy is right," she said softly. "It is his affair, not ours. It will be better for him to go alone."

CHAPTER L.

I MEET MY FATHER.

AFTER a wearying journey I stood at last before the great gates of the castle, the bell at my feet giving shrill notice of my presence. The lodge-keeper hurried out and welcomed me.

I walked swiftly up the winding ascent, straight across the flagged courtyard and entered the castle by a side-door. Then, heedless of the surprised looks of the servants, I made my way to the library, and knocking softly at the door of the inner room, entered.

At first it seemed to me that he was not there, for the chamber was in semi-darkness. The heavily-shaded lamp which stood upon the writing-table was turned down so low as to afford no light at all, and the fitful glow of the firelight left the greater part of the room in shadow. But as I stood upon the threshold a burning coal dropped upon the hearth, and by its flame I saw him leaning back in a high oak chair a few feet away.

Softly I moved across the room towards him and then I saw that he was asleep.

I made no movement, but somehow he seemed to become conscious of my presence and opened his eyes. They fell upon me standing

on the hearth-rug before him, and he sat up with a start.

"Philip!" he cried, "you here? You back? You have found him, then?"

At the sound of his voice I trembled, yet I answered him at once:

"Not yet. To-morrow night I shall see him. Till then I could do nothing—and I came here."

He looked at my mud-bespattered boots and wind-tossed hair.

"You have walked from Mellborough?" he asked. Then something in my face seemed to strike him, and, leaning forward, he placed his hands upon my shoulders and turned towards the glow of the fire.

"You have come with a purpose!" he said slowly. "Tell me—you have heard something in London?"

I bowed my head silently.

"Some story of the past—my past?"

"Yes."

"My God!"

Then there was silence between us. I bore it till I could bear it no longer.

"Can you wonder that I have come?" I cried, my voice shaking with a passion which I knew no longer how to restrain. "Oh, speak to me! Tell me whether this thing is true?"

"It is true."

He had drawn back a little; he had hesitated. I caught hold of his hands and drew him towards me.

"My father," I cried passionately, "speak to me! Why do you draw away? Is it because—because—oh, only speak to me, call me your son, and if there be anything to forgive I will forgive it."

He seemed suddenly to abandon an unnatural

struggle and caught me by the hands and clasped them. For a moment his face was radiant.

"Philip, my son, my dear son!" he cried. "Thank God, it is not that! Thank God, that my name is yours! You are indeed my son."

After a considerable silence my father told me how he had met Marx abroad. He had done him some service and they had become friendly. He latterly engaged him as secretary.

Then he went on to tell me how Marx had met him on his return after his long absence and had taken him to see his wife, who believed him dead.

He then told me how he had found her married again to Farmer Morton and implored her to come back to him. She refused, and he, in a blind fury, rushed back to where he had left Marx.

He was attacked by Morton; a struggle ensued on the brink of the slate-pit. After a time my father managed to fling Morton from him and fled.

That night Marx came to him and told him he had thrown Morton into the quarry, and that a man named Hart, *alias* Francis, had witnessed the deed. My father wanted to confess, but Marx persuaded him to keep silent and paid Francis to bear the crime.

"Now you know why I shrank from calling you my son, knowing that when the time came for you to be told of your parentage, I must also tell you that your father was a murderer!"

"It is false!" I cried, springing up and seizing both his hands. "It was an accident. No one could call it a murder. Oh, my father, my father, that you should have suffered like this for so slight a cause!"

A light leaped into his face and for a moment

his wasted features and sunken eyes glowed and shone with a great, unexpected happiness. He drew me gently to him and laid his hands upon my shoulders.

"Thank God for this, Philip!" he said, with trembling voice. "It is greater consolation than I ever dared hope for in this world."

CHAPTER LI.

DAWN.

On the morrow as we walked out together, my father and I, making our way as though by common consent up towards the bare brown hills, I remembered that there were many things which I wished to say to him.

"I want to ask you about Mr. Marx, father," I began. "Everything concerning him is so utterly mysterious, especially his going away so suddenly. Apart from the fear of his having used some sort of foul play towards Hart—or Francis—I can't help thinking that there is something else wrong with him. You trust him thoroughly, I suppose?" I added hesitatingly.

"I have always done so," my father answered quietly.

"Do you like the man himself?" I asked.

My father shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"I cannot say that he has ever aroused my feelings in any way," he answered. "He has had work to do for me and has done it well and silently. I have looked upon him somewhat as an automaton, although a valuable one. And yet——" he added musingly.

"Yet what?" I interrupted.

"Well, sometimes I have half fancied that he was playing a part, that his interest in our work

was a little strained. He gave me the idea of a man working steadily forward towards a set purpose, and I have never seemed able to reconcile that purpose with the completion of our task. His sudden absences, too—for this is not the first of them,—are strange."

"I should think so," I assented. "Has he taken anything away with him this time?" I asked bluntly.

A very grave look came into my father's face and he did not answer me at once. When he did so his tone was low and anxious.

"Yes, he has. About a fortnight ago we came to the end, virtually, of our long task. There was only a little revision wanted, which he was to have left for me. The night that he disappeared the manuscript disappeared also. Evidently he took it away with him."

"Perhaps he has taken it to the publishers," I suggested. My father shook his head doubtfully.

"Only this morning I have heard from them, begging me to forward it without delay," he said.

I was silent. Even if he had taken the manuscript, what use could he make of it? How could it profit him?

Suddenly I stood still in the path. My heart gave a great leap and a cry broke from my lips. For the first time an idea, the vague phantom of an idea, swept in upon me, carrying all before it, and casting a brilliant, lurid light upon all that seemed so dark and mysterious.

"This man, Marx," I cried, seizing my father's arm. "Tell me quickly. Has he ever reminded you of anyone?"

My father looked at me wonderingly.

"It is strange that you should ask that," he said. "Sometimes, especially when I have come upon him alone, or have seen him excited, his tone

and little mannerisms have seemed somehow vaguely familiar. And yet," he added thoughtfully, "I have never been able to recall of whom they have reminded me."

I opened my trembling lips to speak, but a wave of cold doubt swept in upon me. Surely this thing could not be! I must be mad to let the idea linger for a moment in my mind. And yet——

At that moment of my hesitation, my father's hand fell heavily upon my arm. He pointed forward along the dark avenue with a shaking finger. In the dim twilight we could see the tall gaunt figure of a man in ragged clothes, making his way up to the castle.

"That is not one of my men, Philip," he said hoarsely. "Who is it?"

I shook my head.

"It is a stranger."

My father turned abruptly from the avenue into a side-walk.

"Follow me," he said; "we will go in by the private way."

We walked across the turf, through a little iron gate, which my father unlocked, and entered the shrubbery walk.

Once I looked round through an opening in the laurel leaves. The stranger was leaning wearily against the railings round the lodge, waiting for admittance.

CHAPTER LII.

WHERE IS MR. MARX?

Not until we had reached the Castle and were in the library did my father speak to me. Then his words were grave enough.

"We have done Mr. Marx an injury, Philip," he said slowly.

"How?" I asked.

"Listen, and you will know."

He went to the telephone and signalled. The answer came at once.

"Someone has been asking for me at the gate," he said. "Who is it?"

"A stranger, sir, to see you."

"What name?"

"Hart, sir."

"Is he waiting?"

"Yes, sir. I told him that it would be useless, but he refuses to go away."

"You can pass him. Send him here at once."

My father turned away and looked at me with all the old weariness in his face, but with little agitation. Of the two, I was the more nervous. I crossed the room and laid my hand gently upon his shoulder.

"Thank God that I am here with you! What shall you say to him, father? What does he want, think you? Money?"

My father shook his head sadly.

"He would send if that were all. He has what he wants and that is not much. I fear that he wants something else."

"What?"

"His good name cleared."

"He took the guilt willingly," I cried. "He must bear it now. He cannot escape from it."

"He can," my father answered. "He can tell the truth."

"No one would believe him. It would be his word against yours. What chance would he have?"

My father turned a stern, dark face upon me.

"So you think that I would swear to a lie, Philip? No! There was always this risk. I have felt that if ever he should demand to be set right with the world, it must be done."

"It shall be done."

We started, for the words came from the other side of the room. Standing in the deep shadows just inside the door was a tall, gaunt man, with long dishevelled beard and pale, ghastly face. His clothes were ragged and weather-stained and his boots were thick with mud. I looked towards him fascinated. It was the face of the lunatic who had twice attempted Mr. Marx's life. It was Hart, *alias* Francis, the man who held in his hands a life dearer to me than my own.

"Is it really you, Francis?" my father asked, in a shocked tone. "You are altered. You have been ill. Sit down."

He took no notice. Whilst my father had been speaking his eyes had been wandering restlessly round the room.

"Where is—he?" he asked hoarsely.

"Do you mean Mr. Marx?" I said.

"Yes."

"He is in London."

"Ah!"

There was an expression in his face partly of disappointment, partly of relief. He drew a long breath and remained silent, as though waiting to be questioned.

"Do you want money?" my father asked.

"No."

"Do you want to give up your secret, to let the world know the truth?"

"Yes."

A cry burst from my lips, but my father checked me.

"It is well," he said. "Sit down. You need not fear; I will confess."

"You have nothing to confess. It is I who must do that."

"What do you mean?" my father asked, peering forward into the darkness, for there was no lamp lit in the room. "Come nearer; I cannot see your face."

With trembling fingers I drew up the blind from the high window. The moon, which had just emerged from a bank of black, flying clouds, cast a long stream of light across the room.

Francis moved forward with slow, reluctant steps. Then, with a sudden, wild cry, he threw himself upon his knees before my father.

"As God in Heaven forgives, swear that you will forgive me!" he cried passionately.

"Forgive! I have nothing to forgive," my father answered gently. "You wish to lay down your burden. Good! I am ready to take it up."

He stooped forward in his chair and stretched out his hand to the man to help him rise. In his altered position the moonlight seemed to cast a sort of halo round his face, and it seemed to me like the face of an angel.

"Don't touch me," cried the man; "don't. I

can't bear it! Let me tell you the truth, or I shall die. You think that you killed Farmer Morton. It's false! Mr. Marx killed him."

"What!"

My father had sprung to his feet. Somehow, I found myself by his side. Francis still grovelled on the floor.

"Up, man, and tell me all the truth," my father cried out in a voice of thunder; "up on your feet and speak like a man."

He obeyed at once, trembling in every limb. Then he faltered out his story:

"I was in the wood that night. It was dark; I lost my way. Suddenly I heard voices—yours and Morton's. You were struggling within a few feet of me. Before I could interfere you had thrown him down and rushed away. I heard him breathing hard, and I saw Mr. Marx steal out from behind a tree and creep up to him. Morton heard, too, and sprang up. They struggled together; perhaps in the darkness, Morton mistook him for you. I remembered the quarry and rushed out. I was too late.

"There was a fearful flash of lightning and I saw Marx put forth all his strength and throw the other into the slate-pit. He turned round and saw me.

"He would have hurled me over, too, if he had dared, but I was strong and he was exhausted. So he offered me money to go away. I accepted, never thinking that they would fix the crime upon me. Marx had thought it all out with a devilish cunning. He provided me with disguises and told me where to go to and how to get there. When I was safe away and read the papers, I saw at once how I had been trapped. I had pleaded guilty to the murder.

"Time went on and I grew more miserable

every day. Marx sent me plenty of money—too much. I began to drink. I was ill. When I recovered I wrote to tell him that I could bear it no longer and that I was coming to see him. I told him that I meant to go to a magistrate after I had given him time to get out of the country. He dared me to come to the Castle. Still, I came. It was dusk when I got here. He met me in the avenue. He offered me large sums of money to go away, but I was determined and refused everything. It was then from something he let fall in his anger that I knew how he had been deceiving you. Then I would not listen to him any more and bade him stand out of the way. He let me pass him and then struck me on the back of the head with some heavy weapon."

"My God!" I cried. "I was close to you. I heard you cry and I met Mr. Marx directly afterwards. He must have thrown you down the gravel-pit."

"It was there I found myself when I came to my senses," Francis continued. "Directly I sat up and tried to think over what had happened I began to feel my head swim. After that everything is blurred and dim in my mind. I fled. The second time, you, Mr. Morton, saved his life from me, as my fingers were closing upon his throat.

"They put me in an asylum. Afterwards Mr. Marx passed himself off as my brother and had me moved into a private one. The commissioners came and I appeared before them. I was sane. They let me go. Where is Mr. Marx? Where is Mr. Marx?"

There was a deep silence. Then I held out my hand to my father and he clasped it.

"Thank God!" I cried, my voice quivering with a great sob—"thank God!"

"Amen," my father repeated softly.

Again that question, in the same dry, hard tone.

"Where is Mr. Marx?"

We looked at him—at his nervously twitching hands and burning eyes. The madness was upon him again. We must not let him go. My father drew me on one side.

"I shall go to London with you to-night," he said. "What shall we do with this man?"

"He must stay here," I answered. "Leave it to me."

I went up to him and laid my hand upon his shoulder.

"Listen, Francis," I said. "There are two places where Mr. Marx is likely to be this week. One is in London, the other here. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he answered; "I understand."

"Now, Mr. Ravenor and I know best where to find him in London, but we can't leave unless we know that there is someone on the look-out here as well. If we go to London, will you remain here and watch for him?"

The man's eyes sparkled.

"Yes," he answered quickly. "This is the room where he writes, isn't it? He will come here. Yes, I will wait; I will watch here in this room."

My father rang a bell and ordered a carriage to take us to the station. Then he gave special orders about Francis. He was to be allowed to remain in the library, to use Mr. Ravenor's own sleeping apartment, and to have meals brought to him regularly.

An hour later we left the castle for Torchester. As we drove across the courtyard we could see a pale, gaunt figure standing at the library window, silent and rigid. It was Francis, waiting.

CHAPTER LIII.

MESSRS. HIGGENSON AND CO.

At ten o'clock we reached St. Pancras, travelling by fast train from Torchester, and half an hour later a hansom put us down at the Hotel Metropole. Immediately in front of the entrance Count de Cartienne's small brougham was waiting, and as we descended from the cab his servant stepped forward and handed me a note. I tore it open and read it under the gas-lamp.

"Come to me at once and you will find Mr. M——. Bring the box with you.—C——."

I passed the note on to my father and drew him a little on one side. At the sight of the handwriting he started.

"Philip, whose writing is this?" he asked quickly.

"The writing of the man who alone knows where Marx is," I answered. "It is he who calls for his letters and forwards them."

"His name? I insist upon knowing his name."

"De Cartienne."

My father's face turned a shade paler and his eyebrows contracted.

"You have been keeping this from me, Philip. You shall not go near that man. I forbid it. My God! Marx and De Cartienne friends!"

He stopped short on the pavement and looked

at me with a new light in his face. He began to understand.

"Marx and De Cartienne," he repeated slowly. "Philip, cannot you see what this means? Marx has been De Cartienne's tool and I have been their victim. Where is De Cartienne? Philip, you shall tell me! Do you hear?"

My father seized my arm and held it fast. I turned and faced him.

"Father, you must leave this to me," I said, firmly. "I have thought it all over in the train and my plans are made. You will trust me?"

"Tell me what they are," he said.

"I have in my possession a box belonging to De Cartienne, which contains a secret. Until I yield that box up to him I am safe, since he can only get it from me. You see that he tells me in this note to bring it with me."

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, I am going without the box, and if he is really ignorant of who I am and willing to give me the information about Marx, why, then I can easily come back for it, and whatever it contains he must have unopened.

"If, on the other hand, I fall into any sort of trap and he makes me send for it, then, immediately on receipt of my message, no matter how it is couched, you must force the box open, and if it contains anything in the least suspicious, come straight to my aid with the police. The messenger who comes for the box must be bribed or frightened into bringing you."

"I do not like it, Philip. It is all too roundabout. If De Cartienne has any idea who you are, you are running a risk."

"I don't think so," I answered. "Until he gets possession of that box he will feel himself, to a

certain extent, in my hands and will not be likely to do me an injury."

"What do you suppose the box contains?"

I hesitated and looked around. De Cartienne's servant was some distance off and there was no one within hearing.

"Have you read the newspapers just lately?" I asked.

My father shook his head.

"Only the literary newspapers."

I bought a special edition, which a newsboy was brandishing in our faces, and, turning down the leading article, passed it on to my father. He glanced down at it and then looked up at me in blank amazement.

"Philip, you cannot mean this!" he exclaimed.

"Why not?" I answered. "I do, indeed; but whether there is anything in it or not we shall soon know. I must go now. You understand what to do if I send for the box."

"I don't like your expedition at all," he said, doubtfully. "Have you any idea where you are going?"

I shook my head.

"None; but I shall come to no harm. My star is in the ascendant now. If it leads me into danger it will bring me safely out of it. *Au revoir!*"

Then I sprang into the carriage and was driven swiftly away.

Our journey came to a sudden end, and, if I was surprised at the locality into which it had brought me, I was still more so at its termination. The carriage had stopped outside a gloomy-looking warehouse, the back of which, ornamented with several cranes, overlooked the river. The whole of the front appeared to be in darkness, but from a gas-lamp on the other side of the narrow way I

could read the brass sign-plate by the side of the door:

HIGGENSON AMD CO.

MERCHANTS AND EXPORTERS.

The door of the carriage was thrown open and I was evidently expected to descend. I did so after a moment's hesitation.

"Are you sure that you have brought me to the right place?" I asked the man who held the door open. "This seems to be a warehouse. I think there must be some mistake."

The man silently closed the carriage door and stepped up to his seat beside the driver.

"There is no mistake," he said curtly. "You will find the Count de Cartienne—there."

He pointed to the warehouse door and I saw that it was now open and that a man was standing upon the threshold. I turned towards him doubtfully.

"Will you come this way, Mr. Morton?" he said. "Count de Cartienne is sorry to have to bring you here, but we are busy—very busy, and he had no time to get back to the hotel. The carriage will wait to take you back."

The man's manner and tone were certainly not those of a servant, but from the position in which he stood I could see nothing save the bare outline of his figure. I crossed the pavement towards him.

We left the room and he conducted me down a passage and into a small chamber. Here my companion paused and lit a lamp which stood on a table in the middle of the room.

"Count de Cartienne will be with you in a moment," he said, walking to the door. "Kindly excuse me."

I turned the lamp a little higher and looked

around. The room was quite a small one and plainly furnished as a waiting-room.

For the first time I began to realise fully what I had done in coming to this place at such an hour. Some wild thoughts of a tardy retreat flashed into my mind, and I tried the handle of the door by which we had entered. It turned, but the door remained closed. I stooped down and examined it. The result was as I had feared—a spring lock had fastened it. I tried the other door, by which my guide had issued. The result was the same. I was a prisoner.

I had scarcely time to realise my position before it became necessary to act. The door was suddenly opened and Count de Cartienne stood before me, his eyes flashing with anger and his tall, lithe frame quivering with rage.

"Why have you not brought that box?" he exclaimed in a low, fierce tone.

I stood up facing him, with my back to the table, striving to keep calm, for the situation was critical. The complete change in his appearance and manner towards me was sufficient warning.

"The box is safe enough," I answered. "You can have it in an hour's time. But——"

"But what?" he interrupted, savagely. "Why have you not brought it, as I bade you in my note? Why is it not here? We want it at once!"

"You forget that there is a *quid pro quo* which I expect from you. It seems to me, Count de Cartienne, that you are making a tool of me, and——"

"What is it you want—to see this man Marx?"

"Yes."

"Well, he is not here."

I checked the rejoinder which, had I spoken it, would probably have cost me my life.

"Where is he, then?" I asked.

"I will tell you when you have written for that box," he said, opening a drawer and placing pen and paper upon the table.

I shook my head. "There is no need for me to write. It is of no use my remaining if Mr. Marx is not here. Send your servant back with me and I will give it him."

"No, I shall hold you as a hostage for the box. Besides, I have a few words to say to you, boy," he added grimly. "Write."

I hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Do I understand that you detain me here against my will?" I said, slowly.

"Understand anything you please, but write."

I took up the pen without another word. When I had finished the note he took it from me and read it through. Then he glanced at the address and started.

"Mr. Ravenor! Oh, Mr. Ravenor is in London, is he?" he remarked slowly.

"Yes."

He looked away with the ghost of an evil smile upon his lips.

"Ravenor in London! How strange. He and I are old acquaintances. I must call on him," he added mockingly.

He stood still for a moment and then left the room abruptly with the note in his hand. I tried to follow him, but the door closed too quickly. If I could have seen any means of escape I should have made use of them, for I had gained the knowledge which I had come to seek, and I knew that I was in danger. There was only that solitary window looking out upon the river and the closed door. If this man meant mischief, I was securely in his power.

CHAPTER LIV.

A RAID.

In a few minutes Count de Cartienne returned.

He flashed a sudden keen glance at me.

"I wonder if you have any idea as to the contents of that box," he said, keeping his eyes fixed curiously upon me.

Looking back now, I see clearly that I was guilty of the grossest folly in answering as I did. But I was young, impetuous, conscious of great physical strength, and with all that contempt of danger which such consciousness brings. So, without hesitation, I drew from my pocket the evening paper which I had bought in Northumberland Avenue, and laid my finger upon the column which I had shown my father.

"This may have something to do with it," I remarked.

His face grew a shade paler as he glanced it through. Then he folded it up and handed it back to me with a polite gesture.

"So that is your idea, is it?" he remarked. "Why didn't you go to Scotland Yard and tell them of your suspicions?"

I felt that he was watching me keenly and made a great effort to remain composed, although my pulses were beating fast and I felt my colour rising.

"It was no business of mine," I answered. "Besides, if I had done so I should have lost my chance of finding out anything about Mr. Marx from you."

"Your reasoning does you infinite credit," he answered, with a slight sneer. "You are quite a Machiavelli. Come; I want to show you over my —warehouse."

I followed him reluctantly, for I liked his manner less and less; but I had scarcely an alternative.

We passed along a narrow passage and through several rooms piled up to the ceiling with huge bales; then we descended a winding flight of iron steps, and as we reached the bottom I began to hear a faint hum of voices and strange, muffled sounds.

He unlocked a small, hidden door before us, and we stood on the threshold of a large, dimly-lit cellar.

One swift glance around showed me the truth of my vague suspicions, and warned me, too, of my peril. It was a weird sight. At the far end of the place a small furnace was burning, casting a vivid glow upon the white, startled faces of the men who were grouped around it. One held in his hand a great ladlefull of hissing liquid, and another on his knees was holding steady the mould which was to receive it. But though they kept their positions unchanged, they thought no more of their tasks. The attention of one and all was bent upon me in horror-struck amazement.

The man who first recovered himself sufficiently to be able to frame an articulate sentence was the man holding the ladle.

"Are you mad, De Cartienne?" he hissed out. "What have you brought that young cub down here for?"

"I have brought him here," he answered, with a shade of contempt in his tone at the alarm which

"He unlocked a small, hidden door before us, and we stood on the threshold of a large, dimly-lit cellar."

Mr. Marx's Secret] [*Page 300*

they were all showing, "because he is safer here than anywhere else—for the present.

"Somehow or other—probably by looking inside that unfortunate box—this young cub, as you call him, knows our secret. To let him go would, of course, be absurd, so I've brought him here to be tried for his unpardonable curiosity. What shall we do with him? I propose that we throw him into the river."

I moved a little farther back towards the door, listening with strained ears and bated breath, for I fancied that I heard a faint sound of voices and footsteps above. Apparently the others had heard it, too, for there was a death-like silence for a few moments. Then spoke the Count.

"That must be Drummond with the box. Will you go and see, Ferrier?"

There was the trampling of many feet outside, and then a sudden swift torrent of blows upon the closed door.

In an instant all was wild confusion. Count de Cartienne was the only one who was not panic-stricken.

"The game is up," he cried fiercely, "and here is the traitor."

Like lightning he stooped down and I saw something in his hand flash before my eyes. There was a strange burning pain and then everything faded away before my sight. I heard the door beaten down and the sound of my rescuers streaming in. Then all sound became concentrated in a confused roar, which throbbed for a moment in my ears and then died away. Unconsciousness crept in upon me.

When I opened my eyes again I found myself lying upon a bed in a strange room. By my side was my father, leaning back in a low, easy chair.

"Where am I?" I asked. "How long have I been here! Tell me all about it."

My father stood up with a little exclamation of relief.

"Better, Philip? That is well. You are at the nearest decent hotel we could find last night, or rather this morning."

"Tell me all about it," I cried.

"Everyone was taken except De Cartienne. He fought like a tiger and got off. But it is only for a while. He will be caught. His description——"

"His description will be of no use at all," I interrupted, breathlessly. "Has anything been heard of Mr. Marx?"

My father picked up an open telegram from the table by his side.

"Mr. Marx has gone back to Ravenor. This telegram is from the stationmaster at Mellborough."

I leapt from the bed and plunged my still aching head into a basin of water.

"What is the matter, Philip? You will be ill again if you excite yourself," my father said wondering.

"I'm all right," I answered. "What is the time?"

"Four o'clock."

"Quick, then, and we shall catch the five o'clock train to Mellborough," I urged.

"To Mellborough! But how about De Cartienne?"

"De Cartienne! He exists no longer! It is Marx we want."

Then the truth broke in upon my father, and he sprang to his feet with a low cry.

"Philip, why did you not tell me before?"

"I only knew last night for certain. Thank God, kept it to myself. He thinks himself safe as Mr.

Marx—safer than flying the country as the Count de Cartienne—the villain!"

Suddenly my father stopped short on his way to the door.

"Philip," he said hoarsely, "do you remember whom we left at Ravenor waiting for Mr. Marx?"

For the moment I had forgotten it. We looked at one another and there crept into my mind the vision of a gaunt, desperate man, his white face and burning eyes filled with an unutterable fiendish longing. The same thought filled us both. If Mr. Marx made use of his private keys and went straight to the library at the castle, what would come of it?

I laid my hand upon my father's arm.

"There is justice in the world after all," I said hoarsely. "That man will kill him."

Then we went out together without another word.

CHAPTER LV.

THE MYSTERY OF MR. MARX.

It was twenty minutes to eight when we arrived at Mellborough, and, as we had not sent word on, there was no carriage to meet us, nor, as it happened, any spare vehicle. After a brief word or two with the stationmaster, we decided to walk down into the town and order a fly.

When we reached the house, the butler stepped forward, his ruddy face blanched and his voice shaking.

"Thank God you are come, sir! The man you left here, he's gone a raving lunatic, and he's shut himself up there, and got your revolvers out, and swears that no one shall enter the room till you come."

"There's someone with him," my father said quickly.

The man's face seemed literally shrunken up with horror.

"It's awful, sir; I've been near once, and I'll never get over it as long as I live. He's got some poor wretch there, killing him by inches, torturing him like a cat does a mouse. He's been shrieking for help for hours, and we can do nothing. The poor creature must be nearly dead now. Ah, there it is again, sir! Four of our men have been shot

trying to get to him. Listen! Oh, why does he not die!"

A low, faint cry, full of a most heart-stirring anguish, floated out from the library window. It was the most awful sound I have ever heard in my life. Following close upon it, drowning its faint echo, came the loud mocking laugh of the torturer, ringing out harsh and mirthless in hideous contrast.

A deep, audible shudder passed through the little group of bystanders. Then my father, without a word, started forward across the lawn towards the window and I followed close behind. It seemed to me that everyone must be holding their breath, the silence was so intense. The wind had dropped for a moment, and the moon shone faintly down through a cloud of mist upon the white, eager faces, filled now with a new anxiety.

A few swift steps brought us to the window. A lamp was burning upon the writing-table and the interior of the room was clearly visible. On the floor a little distance from the window was a dark shape which, as we drew nearer, we could see to be the prostrate figure of a man. Walking up and down in front of it, with short, uneven steps, was Francis, his hair and dress in wild disorder and his whole appearance betokening that he had recently been engaged in a desperate struggle.

Suddenly he turned round and saw us. With a wild cry of rage he rushed to the window, the glass of which was completely wrecked, and glared at us threateningly through the framework.

"Away! away!" he shrieked, "or there will be more trouble! I must stay here, I must wait till he comes! Let me be, I tell you!"

The revolver, which he clenched in his right hand, was raised and levelled. It was a dreadful moment.

"It is I, Mr. Ravenor," my father answered calmly. "Don't you know me, Francis?"

Again the moon broke through the clouds and shone with a faint light upon my father's pale, stern face. Francis recognised him at once. He threw his hands high over his head in a wild gesture of welcome and flung open the window. My father walked steadily forward into the room and I followed him. Francis, trembling with eagerness, stood between us.

"See," he cried, pointing downwards, "is it not well done? See! Let me tell you about it. Quick! quick! He came! It was twilight! He was at the cabinet there. I stole out of the darkness. I flung my arms around him. He struggled. Ah! how he struggled; but it was all no use. Ha! ha! ha! I was too strong for him. I held him tighter and tighter, till I nearly strangled him, and he gasped and gurgled and moaned. Oh! it was fine to see him. Then I found a cord in the drawer there and I bound him, and while I fastened the knots I laughed and I talked to him. I talked about that night in the storm when he threw his father"—he pointed a long, quivering finger at me—"threw him into the slate quarry, and about that day when he came to the Castle gate and brought me to the plantation, and suddenly caught me by the throat till he thought he had strangled me, and beat me on the head. Ah, how my head has burned ever since, ever since, ever since! Ah, Milly, come to me! Milly, I am on fire! My head is on fire! Ah, ah!"

The foam burst out from between his pallid, quivering lips, and his eyes, red and burning, suddenly closed. A ghastly change crept over his blood-stained, pallid face. He sank backwards and fell heavily upon the floor.

We scarcely noticed him, for our eyes were bent

elsewhere. The horror of that sight lived with me afterwards for many years, a haunting shadow over my life—disturbing even its sweetest moments, a hideous, maddening memory. I am not going to attempt to describe it. No words could express the horror of it. Such things are not to be written about.

Even my father's iron nerve seemed to give way for a moment, and he stood by my side trembling, with his head buried in his hands. Then he sank on his knees and loosened the cords.

"Thank God he is dead," he murmured fervently, as he felt the cold body and lifeless pulse, and cleared away the last fragments of disguise from the head and face. "You had better call Mr. Carrol in, Philip."

Even as he spoke, a little awed group was silently filling the room, Carrol and his sergeant amongst them. But after all they were cheated of their task, for out in the moonlight John Francis lay stark, the madness gone from his white, still face, and the calm of death reigning there instead.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE END OF IT.

We were together, my father and I, under the shade of a little cluster of olive trees high up among the mountains. Far away below us the Campagna stretched to the foot of the dim hills steeped in blue which surround the Eternal City, towards which we had been gazing in a silence which had been for long unbroken. It was I at last who spoke, pointing downwards to where the bare grey stone walls of a small monastic building rose with almost startling abruptness from a narrow ledge of sward overhanging the precipice.

"Is this to be the end, then, father?" I cried bitterly; "this prison-house?"

He turned towards me with a look upon his face which I had grown to hate—a look calm and gentle enough, but full of resolution as unchanging as the mountains which towered above us.

"It must be so, Philip," he said, quietly. "Is it well, think you, that I should return again into the life which I am weary of, when all that I desire lies here ready to my hand? Peace and rest—I want nothing more."

"And why cannot you find them in England—at Ravenor with me?" I cried eagerly. "And your work, too—it could be done again. We would live alone there and bury ourselves

from the world and everyone in it. I could help you. I could be your amanuensis. I should like that better than anything. Remember how all the papers lamented the cruel destruction of your manuscripts, and how everyone hoped that you would rewrite them. Oh, you must not do this thing, father—you must not! You have no right to cut yourself off from the world—no right!" I re-echoed passionately.

He shook his head slowly, but alas! with no sign of yielding.

"Philip," he said quietly, "it troubles me to hear you plead like this in vain, for so it must ever be. I am happy now; happy in the recollection of the time we have spent together. Happy, too, in the thought that I can end my days in peace, with no disturbing ghosts of the past to rise up and haunt me!"

I was silent and kept my face turned away towards the mountains, for I would not have had him see my weakness. Soon he spoke again, and this time there was a vein of sadness in his tone.

"The time has come for us to part for awhile, Philip. There is one thing more which I would say to you. It concerns Cecil."

"Cecil?" I echoed vaguely.

"Yes."

"All his life he has been brought up to consider himself my heir. Now, of course, things will be very different with him. He is weak and easily led. I should like to think that you were friends; and if you have an opportunity of helping him in any way you will not neglect it."

"I will not," I promised. "Cecil and I will always be friends."

We descended the steep hillside path and stood together almost on the threshold of the little

monastery. Then my father held out his hand to me, and a soft, sweet light shone for a moment in his dark blue eyes.

"Farewell, Philip," he said—"farewell. God bless you." And while I was returning the grasp of his closed fingers and struggling to keep down a rising lump in my throat, he passed away from me silently, like a figure in a dream, and the thick, nail-studded door opened and was closed behind him.

Then I set my face towards Rome, with blurred eyesight and a bitter sense of loss at my heart. I was going back to England to take possession of a great inheritance, but there was no joy in the thought, only an unutterable, intolerable loneliness which weighed down my heart and spirits and filled me with deep depression.

Cecil met me in London, and we went to Ravenor together. It was a strange sensation to me to enter the Castle as its virtual owner, to wander from room to room, from gallery to gallery, and know that it was all mine, and that the long line of Ravenors who frowned and smiled upon me from their dark, worm-eaten frames were my ancestors. At first it seemed pleasant —pleasant, at least, in a measure,—but when I stood in the library and passed on into that little chamber the memories connected with them swept in upon me with such irresistible force that I was glad to send Cecil away for a while.

For some time I lived quite alone, save for Cecil's frequent visits, keeping aloof from the people who lived near, and making but few acquaintances. The days I spent either on horseback or with my gun, or often tramping many miles over the open country with a book in my pocket, after the fashion of the days of my boyhood. The nights I had no difficulty about whatever. With

such a library as my father's to help me, my love of reading became almost a part of myself.

There was one person who viewed this change with profound dissatisfaction, and who at last broke into open protest.

"I say, Phil, you know it won't do," Cecil declared one night, when I had tried to steal away into the library on some pretext. "A young fellow of your age, with eighty thousand a year, has no business to shut himself up with a lot of musty books and dream away his time like an old hermit. People are asking about you everywhere, and I'm getting tired of explaining what a rum sort of chap you are. It won't do, really."

"Well," I answered, "what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to come back to town with me and put up with my people a bit. The mater is very keen about it; in fact, she says that she shall come down here in the autumn if you don't come."

I leaned back in my chair and a day-dream rose up before me.

"What is your sister like now, Cis?" I asked suddenly.

"Trixie! Oh, she's turned out pretty well, I think!" he answered complacently. "What friends you two used to be, by the by!"

We said no more about the matter then, but on the following morning I received two letters, one from Lady Silchester and the other from Lord Langerdale, both urging me to pay at least a short visit to London and perform social duties, which naturally seemed of more importance to them than to me. I read them through carefully and made up my mind at once. But Lord Langerdale's letter had stirred up some old memories, and I did not tell Cecil my decision immediately.

"You are about town a good deal, Cecil. Do

you ever see anything of Leonard de Cartienne?" I asked.

Cecil shook his head.

"No, nor am I ever likely to," he answered. "I have heard of him, though, by a strange fluke."

"What is he doing?"

"Got a commission in the Turkish army. Queer thing I heard the other day from a man I used to know very well once. He's secretary at the Embassy now at Constantinople, and he asked me whether I ever came across him. Seems he isn't particularly popular out there."

"He's a bad lot," I remarked.

"Jolly sure of it," Cecil assented. "No one but a blackguard would have behaved as he did to poor little Milly. But about London, Phil?"

"I will go," I said. "If you like we will leave here to-morrow."

Lady Silchester received us very kindly, and Beatrice, though full of the distractions of her first season, seemed even better pleased to see us. It was strange how much I found in the tall slim girl, whom everyone was quoting as the beauty of the season, to remind me of the quaint, old-fashioned child whose imperious manner and naïve talk had so charmed me a few years ago. There were the same wealth of ruddy golden hair, the same delicate features, and the same dainty little mannerisms. Everyone admired Lady Beatrice, and so did I.

My stay in London lasted till the end of the season. I made my orthodox *début* into Society under the wing of Lord Langerdale, and divided my time pretty well between my aunt and uncle and the house in Cadogan Square. When at last it was all over, Lord and Lady Langerdale, Lady Silchester, Cecil, and Beatrice returned to Ravenor as my guests.

I am not writing a love story. I cannot trace the growth of my love for Beatrice, for it seemed to come upon me with a rush; and yet, when I wondered how it came, it seemed to me that it must have been always so. Those long summer days at Ravenor were the sweetest I had ever known. I lost all count of time. Hours and days and weeks seemed all blended in an exquisite dream, from which, unlike all others, the awakening was at once the culmination and the happiest part. For one night we came back hand in hand from wandering about on the terraces under a starlit sky, and a great joy was gliding through my veins and throbbing in my heart.

Need I say what had happened? Beatrice was mine, my own, and I was very happy.

"Come to me when you are married—both of you," was my father's message; and we went. Alas, for the cloud which so soon dimmed our newborn happiness! We arrived in time—only just in time—to stand by his death-bed.

How the scene comes back to me! The door and windows of his little chamber were thrown wide open and the soft, languorous breeze, heavy with the odour of wild flowers, stole in and played upon his wasted face.

What a countenance it was! Passion-scarred, yet chastened and softened by keen physical pain; the burning blue eyes fixed steadily, yet with a sweet, steadfast light, upon the dim horizon —beautiful after the highest type of spiritual beauty. Twilight stole down from the hills, and then we gently folded his arms upon his breast, and the watchers outside, knowing well what such an action meant, wiped the tears from their eyes and slowly wended their way homewards.

Then, later, the solemn chant of the monks in pious procession broke the stillness of the

mountain night. But such a death was scarcely death. At least, it was death robbed of all its terrors; unutterably sad, yet unutterably sweet. There was truth beyond expression in the simple words rudely carved upon the wooden cross which, amid a score or two of others in a sheltered nook down in the valley, stands at the foot of his narrow grave—

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